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AWARDS 2020



Our favourite products in 26 categories

111
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OF THE YEAR



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p24



Vital home entertainment

What a year. I could never have guessed, when I wrote the introduction to 2019's Awards issue, quite what was in store for us all in the following 12 months. And it's not over yet, of course.

This year, then, there can be no Park Lane black-tie get-together to celebrate the very best the wonderful home entertainment industry can produce. All the more important then, surely, to fly the flag for the superb products themselves: this year, more than any other, has highlighted the value of listening to music and watching movies and box-sets with your family at home.

We're proud, then, to be able to do just that here. Our Awards presentation starts on page 27, and includes, as ever, the very greatest products you can buy in every category at every price, from **wireless headphones (p28)** to **televisions (p78)** via **music streamers (p48)** and our biggest category, as ever, **stereo loudspeakers (p64)**.

Every one of these products is, in our opinion, the best you can buy at the price; every one is a winner – you can't go wrong!

Jonathan Evans, editor

MY PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

KEF LS50 Wireless II

It snuck in right at the end of the Awards deadline, but I can look no further than this stunning system for the 2020s.



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HOW WE TEST



EXPERIENCE. HERITAGE.

We've been helping the world discover the best in hi-fi and home entertainment for more than 40 years, and have more than 100 years of reviewing experience under our collective belts – so you can count on our expert opinion.



DEDICATED TEST FACILITIES

We test every product against its peers in our extensive, bespoke reviewing facilities in London and Bath. We conduct all our tests as a team – our opinions and conclusions are always the result of collaboration.

HOW WE SCORE

All review verdicts are agreed upon by the team as a whole – not an individual reviewer. Each product will be listened to and/or viewed by several members of the test team, who will then discuss the final verdict before it appears in the magazine or on the website. This avoids any individual bias creeping in.

OUR SCORES EXPLAINED

One of the best ★★★★★
A serious contender ★★★★☆
Worth a look ★★★☆☆
Disappointing ★★☆☆☆
Awful ★☆☆☆☆

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Look out for this badge to find the best price

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY: Phil Barker

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WITH

SEVENoaks
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27

AWARDS 2020

All 116 Award winners revealed,
including 26 Products of the Year

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OUR PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR



JOE COX Global editor-in-chief
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BUYER'S GUIDE FIND THE BEST KIT AROUND, FAST!

Every product worth owning.
Starting on page 103



154
ANDY CLOUGH

A tribute to our colleague – the man known as 'Mr What Hi-Fi?'


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4K Television | **£1799** | whf.cm/KD-48A9

Sony KD-48A9

At last, the magical synergy of an LG OLED panel and Sony's picture-processing tech is available on a 48-inch screen

Having a small or medium-sized living room shouldn't prohibit you from owning a genuinely brilliant TV, which is why it's a shame that, for the past few years, true flagship models have gone no smaller than 55in. For many, that's simply too big.

But this year, that has changed. Predictably, the first 48-inch OLED TV was launched by LG, the company behind all of the OLED TV panels currently used by every manufacturer; and excellent it is, too.

Hot on its heels comes Sony's KD-48A9, which is even better. In fact, it may well be the best sub-55in TV ever made. It's certainly the best you can buy right now, although that sort of quality does come at a price.

Minimalist appearance

Clearly looking to capitalise on the compact nature of the new, smaller OLED panel, Sony appears to have made the 48A9 as small as possible, at least in terms of height and width. The flush, black bezel along the top and sides is less than 1cm thick, while the stylishly glossy bottom edge - which features a Sony logo so subtle that in most light it's invisible - is only slightly thicker.

The pedestal stand, which gives the set a narrow footprint of just under 47cm, has such a low profile that there's barely a 5mm gap between the bottom edge of the TV and the surface upon

KEY FEATURES



4K



OLED



HDR10, HLG, Dolby Vision

which it's placed. The downside to that discreet stand is that any soundbar placed in front of the set will block a fair amount of screen. Sony hopes you won't consider purchasing a soundbar necessary, thanks to the screen-vibrating audio tech built into the TV.

While OLED panels are extremely thin, all OLED TVs need an enclosure for the speakers, processing hardware and connections. The enclosure on the rear of the KD-48A9 is bigger than most, both in terms of how much of the panel it covers and the overall depth that it adds. While LG's own 48in OLED (the OLED48CX) measures 4.7cm at its thickest point, the Sony is 6cm. Ultimately, though, it just looks a little less impressive in profile.

The set's connections, many of which can be hidden by plastic panels included in the box, include aerial and satellite (full Freesat functionality is coming soon), ethernet, three USBs, optical and headphone outputs, and four HDMI. HDMI 3 supports both ARC and the more advanced eARC, but that's the only advanced HDMI feature that the set has.

Competitive with games

There's no support for 4K@120Hz (HFR), VRR (Variable Refresh Rate) or even ALLM, and that will come as a disappointment to gamers, particularly those planning to buy a PS5 or Xbox Series X. The set does at least boast a

competitive input lag of under 19ms when the Game mode is selected.

Sony's X1 Ultimate processor, which made its debut in 2019 but remains the company's top TV chip, is nestled at the core of the KD-48A9's chassis. This means it gets advanced features such as Object-Based Super Resolution, which is designed to intelligently analyse and enhance the definition of individual objects in an image, and an improved version of Object-Based HDR Remaster, which applies a similar approach to contrast. The set also gets Sony's Pixel Contrast Booster, which is designed to enhance colour and contrast in bright areas of the image.

Master status?

While this A9 carries 'Master Series' designation, which Sony uses for its flagship models, a couple of its features are at the same level as the A8, which isn't a Master Series model, rather than the AG9, which is. It has X-Motion Clarity instead of Motionflow XR, and Acoustic Surface Audio rather than Acoustic Surface Audio+. Those minor downgrades don't hold the A9 back from excellence, but they do highlight some inconsistencies in Sony's marketing.

Sony has kept the faith with Google's Android TV operating system, and it's beginning to pay off. While it may never be the equal of Samsung and LG's bespoke systems - it often feels like

WHAT HI·FI?



Image: Sony / Stargirl, Amazon Prime

"For sharpness and detail, there's never been a better TV at this size, and the way the set combines ultra-deep blacks and bright, pure whites creates an unrivalled sense of depth and solidity"

having a media streamer built into the TV rather than the true heart of its software – it is steadily becoming slicker, more intuitive and more fully featured.

Sony should be applauded, too, for bolstering the core Android TV app offering. So, while Android TVs from the likes of Philips lack Now TV and BT Sport, the Sony A9 has both. Sony says the Apple TV app is also coming soon, bringing with it Apple's unparalleled pay-as-you-go library of 4K HDR films.

With those additions, there are no significant gaps in the Sony A9's app offering. So, you get Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+, Google Play Movies & TV and Rakuten, all in 4K and HDR (Dolby Vision in the cases of Netflix and Disney+); BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All 4 and My5 complete the suite of core

catch-up apps. Plex is on board for local streaming of your own media files, and music and radio are covered by Spotify, Tidal, Deezer, BBC Sounds and TuneIn.

Use your device

If any service you use isn't covered – Amazon Music or Apple Music, for example – the set also features both Apple AirPlay 2 and Google Chromecast. The only slight disappointment is that content in the Disney+ app that should be available in Dolby Atmos appears to work only in 5.1 via the Sony. This has been the case on all of the Sony (and Philips) models we've recently reviewed.

Straight out of the box, the A9 is cautious in its delivery, seemingly reluctant to deliver the sort of dazzling contrast we've come to expect from great

HDR signals. After a bit of tweaking, that issue is solved, and as we fire up *Blade Runner 2049* we're delighted to see the film's bright red and white text appear on the perfectly black screen with serious punch and purity. In fact, it has the measure of the LG CX in this regard.

It also trumps the CX at the opposite end of the spectrum: while both sets deliver pure, pitch black, the Sony manages to dig up more dark detail, reproducing the interior of Sapper Morton's dingy farmhouse with more scene-setting insight.

Less of a surprise is that the A9 handles motion better than the CX. Sony has long been the unchallenged master of motion processing and, while other manufacturers have made significant improvements this year, the way the A9 (and many of its siblings, for that matter) smoothes and sharpens motion without introducing fizz or artificiality is superb. When it comes to swift movement, everything looks as it should, only better, and the fact that Sony has been





Images: Sony

so far ahead of its rivals for so long here proves what a tricky feat that is.

Sony's Master Series models are sold on their dedication to delivering the picture as intended, and the A9 also delivers here. There's a slight warmth and richness to the colours that may not be entirely true to life, but it is true to cinema. We're not talking about the horrible sepia-tinted blandness that you're confronted by when you select most TVs' Cinema mode: this is a subtle rosiness that enhances the sense of life in skin tones. Again, everything looks as it should, only better.

For sharpness and detail, there's never been a better TV at this size, and the way the set combines ultra-deep blacks and bright, pure whites works with these qualities to create an unrivalled sense of depth and solidity in the image. Whether it's the close-up of K's hand at the start of *Blade Runner 2049* or the eerily beautiful shots of the war-ravaged town in the epic *1917*, everything has a palpable and involving three-dimensionality.

Hi-def control

Dropping down to 1080p with the Blu-ray of *Children Of Men*, the Sony does a superb job of maintaining control of the shaky, handheld action, keeping everything blur- and judder-free without adding an unpleasant soap-opera effect. Colours are again superb and the image is sharp, detailed and clean.

That cleanliness continues as we stream old, standard-def episodes of

The rear enclosure is larger than those on most rivals

Spaced via Netflix. Given the low resolution of the signal, the image is both smooth and sharp, surprisingly detailed, and with colours that are vibrant but controlled.

Audio improvements

The Sony A9 is a significant step-up on its closest rival for sound, too. The uncomfortably bass-heavy beginning to the second chapter of *Blade Runner 2049* makes the LG CX's drivers flap badly, but the Sony remains composed and clean.

It's punchy and dynamic, too, building the drama just as it should as K approaches the foreboding LAPD building. We opt for the Cinema preset, which adds openness and spaciousness, and this generates a good sense of atmosphere as our protagonist takes his bewildering baseline test, the voice of his commanding officer echoing off the bare walls of the boxy room. K's own voice, by comparison, is clear and direct and, thanks to the A9's screen-vibrating tech, the audio and video are more spatially connected than on other TVs.

But while the A9 sounds good for a TV, particularly one this size, it can be pushed to hardness by high volumes. If you want audio quality that's equal to the picture that this screen supplies, a dedicated sound system is still the way to go, particularly if you like your films loud and bombastic.

The Sony KD-48A9 is a stunning TV. The quality of TVs below 55 inches in size has been limited for years, but LG has blown the doors off those limitations by making a 48in OLED panel available. Sony has taken LG's panel and, with its own picture processing and audio wizardry, raised the benchmark previously (and briefly) held by LG's own OLED48CX.

Simply the best

This is, without doubt, the best sub-55in TV you can buy - and possibly the best ever made. It's expensive for a TV this size, but if you have the budget and aren't fazed by a lack of HDMI 2.1 features, you should consider it well worth the money.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE

★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

FOR

- Striking picture performance
- Strong sound
- Solid app selection

AGAINST

- Pricey for a set this size
- Lack of next-gen HDMI features

VERDICT

It's undeniably expensive, but the Sony KD-48A9 is simply the best sub-55in TV you can buy

Special speaker Special finish Special Forty

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2017

Stereo speakers
Best standmount speaker £2000+
Dynaudio Special Forty

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

Stereo speakers
Best standmount speaker over £2000
Dynaudio Special Forty

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ AWARDS 2019

Stereo speakers
Best standmount speaker £2000+
Dynaudio Special Forty

We could use this ad to say that there's a big, clever, research-based reason for introducing the brand-new Ebony Wave finish to Special Forty. We could say we targeted a certain demographic with its deliberately sinuous, precision-made take on the classic hardwood. Something the science told us would be irresistible.

But the truth is, we just thought it looked really, really nice. And we hope you do, too.



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Audiolab 6000A Play

If you've got a good streamer and a good amp, why not combine them?



We can just imagine the Audiolab team gathered together (back when gatherings were allowed), discussing the concept of the 6000A Play. After all, fusing together the company's five-star midrange integrated amplifier and its *What Hi-Fi?* Award-winning budget streamer in one affordable, just-add-speakers streaming system seems to make perfect sense.

The old adage teaches us that two wrongs don't make a right, but surely two rights make a right? Streaming amplifiers are indeed hot stuff in the marketplace today, with the likes of Marantz, Arcam, Bluesound and Quad all represented at around this price point. The competition is heating up, and Audiolab is bringing some heat of its own with the 6000A Play.

The 6000A Play combines the 6000A's amplifier circuitry with the 6000N Play's streaming smarts, which is as good a starting point as any. The former delivers 50W of Class A/B power amplification into 8 ohms, while the latter is founded on the established DTS Play-Fi

KEY FEATURES



aptX Bluetooth



Wi-fi



Power output: 50W

technology, a wireless, hi-res, multi-room platform that puts a whole world of music streaming at your fingertips.

The free Play-Fi app is a portal into music-streaming services, including Spotify, Tidal, Amazon Music, Qobuz, Deezer, TuneIn radio and more – and also provides access to local files on your control device and networked files on NAS drives (up to 24-bit/192kHz). While wi-fi is an option, we would take advantage of the 6000A Play's ethernet port for extra stability.

Convenience features

Favourite playlists and radio stations can be pinned as shortcut presets within the app, and multiple Play-Fi-supporting products (available from a range of brands) can be grouped together in various zones for multi-room playback and control.

Thanks to Works With Alexa support, those who are now accustomed to shouting demands at their devices can use their voice to control the 6000A

Play, providing it's hooked up to an Amazon Alexa-equipped device.

Streaming may be taking the music (and hi-fi) industry by storm, but vinyl and other physical media aren't going anywhere – as Audiolab knows. Traditionalists are well catered for through the 6000A Play's MM phono input, while a further fine spread of three line-level, two optical and two coaxial inputs can collectively accommodate CD players, CD transports, TVs or practically any other analogue or digital source. Last but not least, aptX Bluetooth offers an easy offline way to stream from your phone or music player, too.

The digital inputs feed into the same family of ESS Sabre32 Reference DAC chips found in Audiolab's celebrated M-DAC almost a decade ago. The company has been honing the implementation inside its digital products since, and here is no different.

All sources, save for those hooked up to the legacy analogue sockets, are privy to Audiolab's three user-selectable digital





Image: Audiolab

audio filters - 'fast roll-off', 'slow roll-off' (our favoured mode) and 'minimum phase' - offering some level of customisation based on your partnering equipment and preference.

Preamp possibilities

Two further pairs of line-level connections mean that the 6000A Play can operate solely as a power amplifier connected to an external preamp, or as a source and pre-amp feeding a separate power amplifier. This functionality is managed by one of the three control dials on the front. The other two knobs are for switching sources and adjusting volume.

While a small OLED display might be acceptable on a stereo amplifier, it's harder to justify on a streaming product, where you are more likely to want to see playback information. Alas, the 6000A Play prioritises input and volume over playback info, though at least that's more than you get from the entirely screenless 6000N Play dedicated music streamer. Audiolab might argue that all this information is displayed on your control device's screen, via the DTS Play-Fi app or your music service, but we can imagine it being a bone of contention for some users.

Familiar qualities

The 6000A Play's frontage isn't the only similarity between it and the 6000A; the streaming amp also shares its sibling's penchant for clarity, cleanliness and punch. It is startlingly smooth and articulate, while also being capable of spicing things up with a healthy dose of energetic drive.

Play Kanye West's *Blood On The Leaves* and the Audiolab isn't short of punch and attack - and it also has a copious and

"It shares its sibling's penchant for clarity, cleanliness and punch. It is startlingly smooth and articulate, while also being capable of spicing things up with a healthy dose of energetic drive"

well controlled low-end presence. It's an arresting rendition: the assault of horns is authoritative, the raw synths are cutting, and both West's auto-tuned rap and Nina Simone's vocal samples are sharp and lucid.

Similarly, as we play 65daysofstatic's *Unmake The Wild Light*, the Audiolab's performance is energising, as it rolls through melodic synths and charges through denser, more demanding sections. It's not the most spacious listen, but the 6000A Play organises each strand coherently. This all holds true through the digital connections too: the insight and character is well retained, evidence of the effort that Audiolab put into the digital stage paying off.

The 6000A Play is, in a word, fun. There's certainly more than a suggestion of forwardness and its upbeat character brings benefits to tracks that demand it. At times, however, we'd readily swap some of that for more spaciousness and sincerity. Play Nick Cave's beautiful *Bright Horses* and we find ourselves craving greater subtlety and dynamic

attention from the heavy-handed piano and surging strings - the kind delivered by the class-leading Marantz PM7000N, for example.

The Audiolab communicates every element with the clarity and crispness you'd expect at this price and beyond, yet it struggles truly to get under each note's sentiment, just missing the heart and soul of the piece. The Marantz is the pricier machine, but the extra spend is more than justified by its deeper insight and tighter rhythmic handling.

Promise fulfilment

On paper, the Audiolab 6000A Play shows plenty of promise, and that mostly translates in practice. A well-featured streaming amplifier that is easy to use and entertaining to listen to, it offers a decent option for anyone looking for a simple just-add-speakers machine.

It may not quite reach the class-leading standard of the products in Audiolab's 6000 Series with which it shares its DNA, but this is still an excellent idea well executed.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★☆

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Clear, articulate, punchy listen
- Tight, potent low-end
- Lots of features
- Simple to use

AGAINST

- Sound needs greater subtlety
- Display is limited

VERDICT

A well featured and entertaining streaming amplifier that delivers on almost all fronts

[View offers](#)Turntable | £449 | whf.com/DebutCarbonEvo

Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Evo

Evolution is the word, as the Debut range comes of age

Now's the time for Evolution, according to Pro-Ject. Taking its most popular turntable design and altering almost every aspect, while at the same time increasing the price, is a risky game; but the Debut Carbon Evo is a triumph of calculated risk-taking that takes all the jeopardy out of buying your first deck.

Pro-Ject has worked hard at making its latest Debut a current class leader, but also one with the potential to morph into a steady mid-range competitor by offering a series of affordable add-ons.

Evolutionary upgrades

Among the Evo upgrades are improved motor mounting, new height-adjustable damped feet and a heavy steel platter that weighs 1.7kg and has a thermoplastic elastomer (TPE) damping ring on the inside for reducing resonances.

Perhaps most welcome, though, is the addition of a rocker switch on the bottom, which allows you to adjust the rotation speed. No more removing the platter and manually readjusting the belt when you want to go from 33½ to 45rpm. But we think you'll want to interact with this record player as much as possible.

We have followed Pro-Ject's Debut line for many years, and there's a real sense of it reaching adulthood with the new Debut Carbon Evo. Everything about it says it has reached maturity, from the clean lines and lack of ornamentation to the gorgeous finish of its new satin colourways. Alongside the usual high gloss finishes - available in black, white or red - and a real wood veneer, there are five glorious satin options (black, white, blue, green or yellow) for no extra cost.

Despite it being lightweight and incredibly stiff, we notice a little play in the bearings of the deck's one-piece Carbon tonearm. But that doesn't take away from the fact this is the best tonearm we have found on one of Pro-Ject's Debut offerings.

While most will get the familiar Ortofon 2M Red cartridge, customers in

KEY FEATURES



Speeds: 33½ rpm, 45rpm, 78rpm (optional)



Cartridge supplied



Dimensions (hwd): 12 x 42 x 32cm



the US will instead find the Sumiko Rainier. Our sample features the former, though Pro-Ject's promise of potential upgrades means this is one area in which you might experiment anyway.

Once it's out of the box, you'll have the Debut Carbon Evo up and running in moments - just add the belt, platter and weights and you're pretty much ready to go. Despite the lack of branding, its identity as part of the Pro-Ject family is revealed immediately as the room is bathed in its rich, full-bodied tone.

Magnificently plush midrange

Of course, that is of little surprise. The company has long proven its ability to offer up a magnificently plush midrange, with vocals so often a particular treat when given so much warmth and held up by plenty of weight in the bass.

It is also partnered with a great deal of detail and texture. Where rivals might beef up their sound to disguise a lack of real insight, Pro-Ject welcomes you to explore its vast sonic range, proving its aptitude for making decks that are both easy to listen to and prepared for deeper, more analytical sessions.

That easy-listening, unfussy nature is invaluable for a turntable of this type, at this price, given the vast array of

products with which it might be partnered - but again that would be next to worthless if the new Debut lacked the ability to engage.

It might be an area in which some of the company's decks have been lacking recently, but in terms of dynamic expression and rhythmic precision, we are at least on par for a five-star deck at this price. The Debut Carbon Evo keeps our attention fixed with its keen ear for emotion and just enough drive to punch out staccato rhythms.

It's a more laid-back approach than that taken by similarly priced rivals, such as the Rega Planar 2, but it's convincing nonetheless and entirely in keeping with this Pro-Ject's overall character. The performance might not be quite as energetic or as clean, but it still has plenty of appeal.

Whether or not the Debut Carbon Evo is the best record player for you might be decided by whether you prefer its fuller, more relaxed character or the leaner and more sprightly alternative of its main competitor. What shouldn't be up for question, however, is whether you give it a spin for yourself. For those in the market for a deck costing less than half a grand, the Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Evo is a must listen.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

BUILD

★★★★★

FOR

- Rich, full-bodied presentation
- Expressive and engaging
- No more manual speed change

AGAINST

- Tough competition

VERDICT

Evolution is the word for Pro-Ject's latest deck, but the Debut line has now reached a new kind of maturity

Deezer HiFi

Stream Oasis in hi-res audio.
Listen in astounding quality.



 **deezer**

Available on

SAMSUNG

Google



SONOS

SONY

DEVIALET

 XBOX ONE

View offers

Projector | £6495 | whf.cm/DLA-N5

JVC DLA-N5

JVC delivers yet another high-performing premium projector

JVC's D-ILA projectors have long been some of the best premium performers around. The current range-topper costs around £35,000, but you don't need to be in financial super-yacht territory to get a taste of the company's native 4K fun. Enter the JVC DLA-N5, the baby of the family.

D-ILA is JVC's own name for its liquid crystal on silicon (LCoS) projector panel technology. It prioritises image smoothness and high native contrast with some of the best black depths in the business, at least in the case of the top of the range JVC D-ILA models.

To expect the JVC DLA-N5 to match its pricier siblings is unfair, but with its claimed 40,000:1 contrast ratio, 4K resolution and fully motorised all-glass zoom lens, we're still hoping for a lot of fun. Let's dim the lights and begin.

A sizeable affair

The JVC DLA-N5 is around 50cm wide and deep, and weighs 19.6kg. It's a big machine with proper installation requirements and, though it fits on our racks without a problem, make sure your home cinema space is ready for it.

Its 17-element glass lens can focus an image between 60in and 200in with a

KEY FEATURES



4K

Brightness:
1800 lumensHDR formats:
HDR10, HLG

100in picture possible when projected at a distance of between 3.16m to 6.45m. Focus, zoom and the lens shift - which can move a 16:9 picture by 34 per cent horizontally and 80 per cent vertically - can all be done from the compact remote control.

The handset is backlit and offers shortcuts to HDR, motion processing, picture enhancement, colour space and other handy menus. The four adjustable legs on the underside of the projector also help get the picture aligned.

On the rear are the connectivity options in the form of two HDMI 2.0 ports. The USB socket is for service only and you'll need to buy the RF 3D Synchro Emitter PK-EM2 and some glasses if you want to watch in 3D. The only notable absence is a motorised lens cover - the removable plastic cap is not particularly premium and could knock the focus off slightly when taken on and off, if you're not careful.

With 1800 lumens brightness, the JVC DLA-N5 is a lights-off projector. You can choose to manually set the aperture size to make the picture even darker, but either left alone or set to one of the two auto modes will do just fine. Both Auto 1 and Auto 2 make adjustments in

real-time according to the light levels required for each frame. The first favours subtlety, the second a more dramatic contrast, but both are well chosen.

You can expect to get around 4500 hours of use from the bulb with Lamp Power set to Low. However, as we'd recommend watching in High, you should plan on having to replace it sooner than that. Staying away from the eco mode means a little more fan noise too - JVC claims it's 24dB with the lamp on Low. It's more noticeable in High, but the sound melts into the background once your film is playing.

Projected limitations

There's some HDR support (HDR10 and HLG) but, as with most projectors, HDR10+ and Dolby Vision are off the menu. JVC has continued to make HDR improvements to its D-ILA projectors on this front, however. The most recent firmware update added a feature called Frame Adapt HDR. It allows the projector to analyse any incoming video content and adjust the dynamic range on a frame by frame basis to optimise the light levels on the fly.

Gamers should take note of the Low Latency mode, which keeps the display



The lens can project a 60in-200in image depending on distance from the screen



Complementing the backlit remote, the main controls are sited on the rear panel



There are two HDMI 2.0 ports, but you'll need to buy a PK-EM2 Synchro Emitter accessory if you want to watch in 3D

WHAT HI-FI?

"Thor: Ragnarok in 4K HDR is simply stunning. The contrast handling of the DLA-N5 turns the normally dingy skirmish in Surtur's underground lair into a rare treat"



as responsive as possible without wrecking the quality of the image.

Setting up the projector is easy, thanks to the handy test pattern, easily controllable lens and uncomplicated on-screen menu system. There's also scope to download JVC's calibration software to work with external devices.

Whether it's the aperture, the HDR levels or the way contrast is processed, JVC offers users the choice of doing things manually or leaving it up to the projector. Either way, the DLA-N5 gives you an exceptionally good performance.

Something to Marvel at

Thor: Ragnarok in 4K HDR is simply stunning on our big screen and reference system. Many lower specified projectors do little justice to the tricky opening sequences, but the contrast handling of the DLA-N5 turns the normally dingy skirmish in Surtur's underground lair into a rare treat. The bright spots of fire are full of complex colour and the whole image is consistent and sharp.

When the craggy caverns are flooded with the fire giant's near-black minions, each one is clearly discernible and none of the fight action is lost to the shadows. Set Clear Motion Processing to Low, and there's a sweet spot between judder and over-smoothing, meaning you can enjoy the movement without anything jarring.

Once Hela returns to Asgard, you can really appreciate the D-ILA with its smooth production and black depth. It's

An auto-aperture feature makes real-time adjustments

still short of what you get in darkness from an OLED TV or pricier projector alternatives, but this performance is more than good enough for the price.

Colour production on this machine is stunning and effortlessly nuanced, with skin tones natural and expertly blended. In the Contest of Champions scene, the reds and blues of Thor's cloak and armour are vivid, Loki's tunic is a superbly textured emerald leather and the Grand Master's gold-glittered gown looks every bit the garb of a power-crazed space tyrant. There's a brilliant sense of dimension to the character costumes with so much more monochrome scale available too.

Even dropping down to Full HD with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, on Blu-ray, those colours are still a sight to behold. The more pastel hues of Jakku at sunset are a delight. Each shade moves sweetly into the next, from orange to peach to pink, adding a brilliant sense of place. The N5 has no problems scaling the detail into a 4K picture either. There's

still enough sharpness to make out the almost-white ship heading off into the upper atmosphere in the distance.

The only real note of warning is that the N5 doesn't upscale standard-def content to full screen size. Any content below 1920 x 1080 will be scaled by four times the native resolution of the source. So, a 480p source at 720 x 480 will be displayed as 1440 x 960 and only fill about one-ninth of the display.

That's not ideal, but there are few situations we can think of where there won't be an AVR, Blu-ray player, set-top box or other device in the chain that can't do the upscaling work instead. So, unless you are after a big-screen daytime TV experience, it's nothing to worry about.

The JVC DLA-N5 certainly costs a fair amount, but it still sits short of where the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Even at this price, it feels like there's value to be had with a large-scale picture that's so strong in HDR and colour care. This is one of those products that we wish we had the space and the funds to own.

WHAT HI-FI?**RATING** ★★★★★

PICTURE



FEATURES



BUILD



FOR

- Deep blacks
- Excellent HDR handling
- Brilliant colour control

AGAINST

- Add-on required for 3D
- No full-screen SD upscaling

VERDICT

This JVC projector is a bargain. It offers a decent slice of the range-topping performance at a fraction of the cost

View offers

4K Television | £379 | whf.cm/UE43TU7100

Samsung UE43TU7100

Having the operating system from the company's flagship TVs bodes well for this budget Samsung

It's inevitable that a TV manufacturer focuses its attention on flagship models; but that most seem to put very little effort into their entry-level models is pretty unforgivable.

Samsung is practically alone in making its core performance and feature set available at extremely low prices, as is typified by the new UE43TU7100, which is more or less the cheapest 4K model that the company currently makes.

Finishing touches

There is actually one cheaper model, the UE43TU7000, but the two TVs differ only in their finishes – the TU7100 on review here has a smart-looking dark silver finish, while the TU7000 is plain black. Samsung suggests that the sets are otherwise identical so, if you don't mind the slightly more basic appearance, you could save a little more money by going for the TU7000.

Both models come with plasticky but quite elegant-looking plastic feet that give the set a fairly wide footprint of around 85cm and raise the set 7cm above the surface upon which it's placed. That's a perfect space for a soundbar such as the Sonos Beam. Without the feet, the set measures around 6cm deep, which is slim but not super-skinny.

Around the back, the connections amount to aerial, ethernet and USB sockets, an optical audio output and two HDMI ports. Even at this end of the market, it's rare for a TV to have so few HDMI connections, but we suspect it's a limitation that will affect few buyers. A typical system here is likely to involve a soundbar connected to the eARC-enabled HDMI 2, and a source such as a PVR or games console, connected to HDMI 1.

Flagship features

You won't need to give one of the HDMI ports over to a dedicated streamer, because the TU7100 gets the same Tizen operating system as Samsung's flagship sets. It's absolutely packed with apps, including

KEY FEATURES



4K



HDR10, HDR10+, HLG



HDMI x 2

There are only two HDMI connections at the set's rear

Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Google Play Movies & TV, Rakuten, Disney+ and Apple TV – all in 4K and HDR10 (HDR10+ in the cases of Amazon and Rakuten).

BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All 4 and My5 are here too, and Now TV, BT TV and BT Sport give you contract-free access to the exclusive programming of Sky and BT. Plex, meanwhile, allows for local streaming of your own media files, and music and radio can be streamed via Spotify, Tidal, Apple Music, Amazon Music, Deezer, BBC Sounds and TuneIn. AirPlay 2 is also on board, giving iOS users yet another way of getting content on to the TV.

The Tizen operating system is clean and intuitive, too, although it does feel a little sluggish in operation here compared with Samsung's more powerful sets. It's nothing too bothersome, just a little bit of lag as you switch between apps and scroll along the home menu. The TU7100 has a basic, plastic remote (you have to go up to the TU8000 to get the smarter One Remote), and doesn't have voice control built-in – though it can respond to commands issued via an Alexa- or Google Assistant-powered speaker.

In more core technology terms, this is an LCD model with an edge-LED

backlight. It supports HDR10, HDR10+ and HLG but not Dolby Vision (no Samsung TV supports the Dolby format). Its HDMI ports support ALLM (Auto Low Latency Mode), which automatically switches to the TV's Game mode when a gaming signal is detected, and that Game mode reduces input lag to a low 18ms.

We fire up the HDR10+ 4K Blu-ray of *1917* and are instantly impressed with the TU7100's picture. It's compromised, of course, as it has to be at this end of the market, but those compromises are in the right places and the set delivers an enjoyable core performance.

Depth, sharpness and detail

The set clearly doesn't have the contrast range of a higher-end model, but blacks are surprisingly deep for a TV that costs so little and there's plenty of overall punch. As Lance Corporal Schofield looks across the river to Écoust-Saint-Mein, it is clear that the TU7100 is a sharp and detailed performer, with individual bricks discernible in the building on the opposite shore and the whole scene rendered with solid three-dimensionality.

As Schofield cautiously climbs the building's dimly lit stairs, the Samsung provides lots of insight, digging up



WHAT HI-FI?



"Crispness and detail is delivered without any sense of artificiality or over-enhancement, and the same is true of the way it handles motion"

Image: Absentia, Amazon prime

details that most sets at this price simply can't find. Crucially, this crispness and detail is delivered without any sense of artificiality or over-enhancement - and the same is true of the way the TU7100 handles motion. Switch the processing from the default Auto to Custom and the set strikes a good balance between smoothing and authenticity.

The overall palette of *1917* is subdued, and the TU7100 responds accordingly, avoiding boosting certain shades the way that other sets sometimes do. We've seen the French fields rendered in a rather lurid green that's at odds with the film's overall tone, but that's not the case here.

A vibrant Galaxy

That's not to say that the TU7100 isn't vibrant when it needs to be. We switch to *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* on 4K Blu-ray, and the TV does an excellent job with the neon-lit title sequence and the rainbow-breathing, neon-filled Abilisk.

Dropping down to *Fargo* on 1080p Blu-ray, the TU7100 proves to be a capable upscaler. The image is sharp, detailed and tonally balanced, and the set reduces picture noise without removing the intentional film grain. We notice the slight lack of black depth here

Punchy colours, fine detail and an attractive price

more than with HDR content, but it still goes decently deep and combines that with good insight and punchy highlights.

The TU7100 does an admirable job with standard-definition content, whether from the integrated tuner, one of its many apps or a treasured DVD. Our well-worn copy of *Dirty Harry* is clean and controlled, with vibrant but natural colours. All told, this is an excellent picture performance for a TV of this size and at this low price.

It comes as little surprise that the TU7100's 20W sound system is no sonic masterpiece, and you'd be well advised to budget for a soundbar with which to partner it. However, if you are determined to make do with the built-in speakers, their output is perfectly passable, if a touch treble-heavy.

There are three sound modes available, and each has its own relative merits. Standard is best suited for most content, as it's the clearest and most focused. Amplify boosts bass and treble and opens up the sound, making it a good option for movie night, and Adaptive Sound seems to split the difference.

The TU7100 is about as affordable as TVs get and, as long as you're not expecting the moon on a stick, you should be delighted by its performance.

Expectations need to be tempered at this end of the market, of course, but this TV does a remarkably good job in terms of core picture and sound performance, and boasts the best, most app-packed operating system in the business. As long as you can live with only two HDMI's, there's little reason not to buy.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

PICTURE



SOUND



FEATURES



FOR

- Impressive sharpness and detail
- Tonally balanced
- Intuitive, app-packed interface

AGAINST

- Slightly sluggish operation
- Only two HDMI's

VERDICT

This budget set obviously has its limitations, but the UE43TU7100 is an excellent TV for its price

View offers

Smart speaker | £90 | whf.cm/NestAudio

Google Nest Audio

Google might be doing its bit to make our lives easier – and more sustainable – but what about the sound quality?

Google's new Nest-branded smart speaker has been anointed with the suffix 'Audio', a moniker that suggests the Californian giant is highlighting how splendid its latest voice-activated device actually sounds, rather than what its Google Assistant can help you with.

The redesigned Google Nest Audio feels surprisingly tall and heavy in our hands. Whatever your thoughts on pebble-coloured, fabric-swathed cuboids, here is a second-gen speaker that could never be mistaken for an air freshener. So, will Google's clear shot at nominative determinism succeed or struggle? Let's see.

Visual appeal

The Nest Audio's dimensions are roughly that of a house brick turned upright, but the aesthetic here is altogether more calming. There is no visible branding and no visible controls, apart from a small switch around the back of the unit that turns off voice pick-up.

The speaker is so unassuming it almost fades into the background of your home decor, that is until you bark 'Hey Google' to fire up its makers' AI calling card: a quartet of horizontal LED lights shining out from under the speaker's skin. The enclosure is made from 70 per cent recycled plastic, too – another thoughtful touch.

Under the Nest Audio's chalk-coloured jacket (also available in black) there's a 19mm tweeter, 75mm woofer and Quad Core A53 1.8 GHz processor. There are three capacitive touch controls too, regulating playback, pause and volume. These functions don't require much force and work well.

Give it a plug

The Nest Audio must be plugged in to an electricity socket in your home to operate, so if you want it to sit on a coffee table away from a wall and you don't want to be worried about tripping over a power cable, plan carefully.

Even for Google Home newbies, set-up is a breeze. Plug the Nest Audio in, download the Google Home app, follow the prompts and you're in business. The

KEY FEATURES



Bluetooth
version 5.0



Google Chromecast
built-in



Google Assistant
built-in

speaker calmly locates our wi-fi, accepts our Spotify Premium account, assumes its 'lounge' location within our 'home' and takes on its new name to avoid confusion in our listening facility.

In terms of streaming services, the choice is wide. As well as Spotify, there is also YouTube Music, Deezer, TuneIn and a few others which, once linked, can be accessed by saying 'Hey Google, play Cardi B', for example. With Chromecast built-in, you can also cast tracks to your Google Nest Audio with a couple of clicks of your preferred music-streaming app on your smartphone.

Call and response

Voice pick-up is impeccable throughout our tests, with Google answering accurately, clearly and snappily, even with music playing at high volume and in close proximity.

Within the well designed Google Home app you can now create a stereo pair comprising two Google Nest Audios – a Nest Audio and Google Home can also be paired, but only in mono. Doing so creates a more room-filling, substantial sound with a broader soundscape. Google is currently offering a discount if you buy two Nest Audios, too, which could be a tempting proposition in terms of sound-per-pound value.

According to Google, this speaker is 75 per cent louder, and has 50 per cent more bass than the 2016 Google Home smart speaker it succeeds. So, can you get an enhanced and room-filling sound with just one Google Nest Audio, as the company claims? Sadly not. While those stats may be true, it simply doesn't equate to the levelled-up sound quality we had hoped for.



It's likable as a background music provider and for listening to podcasts in the kitchen – and is both fun and reliable when answering our requests – but it isn't quite the serious audio proposition we'd hoped for, even accounting for its relatively low price.

Listen to a similarly priced JBL Flip 5, for example, and while you won't get smart capabilities (nor app support, nor streaming over wi-fi), Coheed and Cambria's *The Crowding* sounds weightier, times better across the frequencies and features an extra layer of detail throughout the vocal.

Switching to Jojo Desmond's *Studio 54*, Desmond's lyrical, soulful and charismatic belt comes through centrally and is well handled through the Nest's midrange, but we lose the brooding disco bassline that pumps energy through the track. Essentially, music is just not quite as three-dimensional, emotive or dynamic as it ought to be.

The pros and cons

The Google Nest Audio is well-made, easy to operate, hears our requests accurately and answers them with finesse. It also plays music – and for some that will be every box ticked.

If you're looking for a smart speaker to sit in the kitchen and provide a slightly bigger background noise than an entry-level Nest Mini, this is a good option. But, at three times the price of its Mini sibling, we cannot confirm that it's three times as good.

WHAT HI-FI?

RATING ★★★★★

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



FOR

- Google Assistant works impeccably
- Easy set-up
- Improved build and finish

AGAINST

- Sound lacks weight and punch
- Harsh through the treble
- Not as room filling as expected

VERDICT

If you want Google's smarts with volume, this could be for you. But it isn't the audio-focused speaker we'd hoped for

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KEF LS50 Meta

WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★

KEF's exciting new technology helps these standmounters set new standards at the price

KEF launched the original LS50s as an anniversary celebration back in 2012. These standmounters proved a huge success, so much so that they have continued in production pretty much untouched since then.

Eight years is a long run by any standards, but it was made possible by a combination of sound quality, build and aesthetics that remains highly appealing to this day. That hasn't stopped the company's engineers from having a fresh look, however, and the result is the LS50 Metas we have on test here.

The same - but better

The LS50 Metas don't look much different from the LS50s, and in many ways they aren't. The company considered revising that beautifully made enclosure, but concluded that little could be improved.

The cabinet shape and size still works well, and the curved front panel - made of Dough Moulding Compound, a polyester resin combined with glass fibre and calcium carbonate - continues to make for an impressively rigid and well-controlled foundation for the Uni-Q drive unit array.

KEY FEATURES



Metamaterial
Absorption
Technology



Weight: 7.2kg



Dimensions (hwd)
30 x 20 x 28cm

The rest of the box is made from MDF, which is heavily braced and carefully damped to minimise any resonances. The LS50 Metas are available in four different finishes - Mineral White, Carbon Black, Titanium Grey or a Royal Blue Special Edition.

The only obvious changes are to the back panel, which has been tidied up. The fixing holes for the front baffle retention bolts have disappeared, and there has also been some cosmetic detailing to make it all look neater.

The one area ripe for improvement was the LS50's Uni-Q driver array, where the tweeter sits in the throat of the mid/bass unit. This has been thoroughly reworked, taking in all the refinements that KEF has developed over the past eight years - and adding something new in the form of Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT).

MAT is KEF's way of coping with the sound that comes off the back of the 25mm aluminium tweeter dome. In a conventional design, this sound usually fires into a chamber behind the dome where it is mostly absorbed by damping material. But some of this sound energy always bounces back through the dome to add distortion.

Here, the rearward sound feeds into something about the size of a hockey puck that looks like a plastic circular maze. It is layered and made up of 30 tubes, each tuned to absorb a different frequency. KEF claims that, once combined, the tubes absorb a wide range of frequencies - from around 600Hz upwards - much more effectively than alternate methods. The result should be cleaner, less distorted highs.

Identical specs

There have been tweaks to the crossover to take all the drive unit changes into account. Aside from a slight shift in crossover frequency - from 2.2kHz to 2.1kHz - the specifications look identical. These aren't particularly sensitive

speakers, at a rated 85dB/W/m, and the minimum impedance is just 3.5 ohms, so it makes sense to partner them with an amplifier that has a bit of grunt.

We suggest Cambridge's CXA81 integrated with a suitably capable source, though such are the LS50 Meta's capabilities that you could easily use the likes of Naim's SuperNait 3, and the speakers wouldn't be limiting.

At just 30cm tall, these KEFs are pretty compact, but don't be tempted to stuff them in a bookshelf or right up against a wall. They won't sulk if you do, but they will certainly sound a lot better if placed around 50cm into a room and well away from the sidewalls.

It doesn't take long to realise that the LS50s have improved significantly. While the basic sonic character is instantly familiar, the new speakers have gained a level of clarity and finesse the originals only hinted at.

Listening to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, we're soon marvelling at the LS50 Metas' delicacy and precision. They sound so much more transparent than before and manage to render low-level details, such as instrumental textures, much more convincingly.





"The Metamaterial tech really works. These KEFs sound much cleaner and more sophisticated than before. They even make the excellent R3s sound ham-fisted in comparison, and that's a real shock"

It's a surprisingly full-bodied presentation with a good degree of authority for such compact speakers. Still, there's only so deep a 13cm magnesium/aluminium mid/bass unit in a smallish, 30cm-tall cabinet can go.

If your budget can stretch a little further, towards the likes of the Award-winning and larger three-way KEF R3s (£1300), you'll get notably more in the way of low-frequency reach and punch. But what you won't get is the LS50 Meta's insight, delicacy or top-end refinement.

Technological advances

It looks like the Metamaterial technology really works. These new KEFs sound so much cleaner and more sophisticated than before, particularly at higher frequencies. In fact, these Metas even manage to make the excellent R3s sound congested and ham-fisted in comparison, and that's a real shock.

Large-scale dynamics are handled well and there's a decent amount of muscle for a speaker of this size. These are refined and composed performers that rarely sound stressed unless volume levels are particularly high.

There's little to complain about when it comes to tonality either. The KEFs sound smooth and balanced while still having enough in the way of high-frequency bite. They will reveal the shortcomings in poor recordings, but don't go out of their way to be nasty.

KEF's Uni-Q designs tend to image well by their very nature, and these speakers are no different. The LS50 Metas generate an expansive and tightly focused soundstage where the instruments are layered convincingly. We're also impressed by the stability of the image, especially when the music gets demanding.

We switch to Neneh Cherry's *Blank Project* and these KEFs continue to shine. Their detailed and clear midrange

performance makes the most of Cherry's passionate vocals, delivering dynamic nuances and subtle shifts in timing superbly. There's a good degree of punch to the bass and these KEFs render rhythms in a surefooted manner. We've heard more enthusiastic rivals, but none that can match the KEFs' many and varied range of strengths.

We've always loved the LS50s and this new version takes their performance to a notably higher level. We think KEF is on to something with the Metamaterial technology and can't wait to see how it develops. As things stand, that tech and all the other work KEF's engineers have put into the Uni-Q array has propelled the LS50 Metas to the head of the class at this level. Buy them with confidence.

WHAT HI-FI?

SOUND



COMPATIBILITY



BUILD



FOR

- Exceptional sonic transparency
- Subtle and precise presentation
- Innovative technology

AGAINST

- Nothing at this price

VERDICT

KEF has taken an excellent speaker and made it even better with its innovative Metamaterial tech

RATING ★★★★★



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WHAT HI-FI?

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WIRELESS HEADPHONES

Huge technological advances and keen competition add up to a real bonanza for the buyer in this sector



Image credit: Sony

■ Sony WH-1000XM4 £349

By any standards these new noise-cancelling cans are a big deal. Not only do they replace the *What Hi-Fi?* Award-winning WH-1000XM3s (see p31), one of the most popular pairs of headphones on the planet, they also introduce a raft of improvements and new features.

The XM4s are only one gram lighter than their stablemates (254g vs 255g), but provide an even more comfortable fit. There's just enough pressure to grip your ears and get a solid seal around them without the headphones feeling too loose – although we wouldn't recommend using them during exercise.

You'll need to run Sony's NC Optimiser (via the 'Custom' button) before you use the headphones for the first time. It optimises the noise-cancelling based on factors such as the shape of your face and whether or not you wear glasses.

There are a host of other new features too numerous to describe here, but we

will mention what we see as the headline feature for the XM4 – a new sound processor. This attempts to upscale compressed music to near hi-res quality.

There's no aptX or aptX HD support, but the Sonys are compatible with the company's own LDAC technology, which allows you to stream high-quality audio wirelessly from a compatible source. You can also now switch between two Bluetooth-connected devices. Battery life remains among the best in class, with a full charge lasting up to 38 hours.

We're pleased to report that claimed improvements in Sony's noise-cancelling tech have translated into a hugely impressive noise-cancelling performance. You feel isolated from the outside world, which leaves you free to enjoy the music.

It's soon apparent to us that Sony has managed to squeeze out even more performance from the WH-1000XM4. The soundfield appears wider and there's

Improved sound
and great features
take these Sonys
straight to the top

even more detail as well as a greater level of composure and confidence, especially when it comes to lower frequencies. There's power, punch and a sense of poise that makes the WH-1000XM3 sound, dare we say it, a little tubby.

Play Ramin Djawadi's cover of The White Stripes' *Seven Nation Army* and the clarity and definition of the strings really shines through. There's a newfound smoothness in the treble too.

Timing and dynamics are equally impressive, the headphones communicating dynamic shifts with ease. Their sense of enthusiasm, pace and agility also means they're as happy charging through The xx's *I Dare You* as they are getting to grips with the complexities of Radiohead's *15 Step*.

The WH-1000XM4s are supremely comfortable, introduce useful features and, more importantly, give you a serious hike in sound quality for the money.

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ AWARDS 2020

**BEST WIRELESS IN-EARS
UNDER £75**

■ Wharfedale DX-2 £399

Earfun is a little-known Hong Kong audio firm that sells two pairs of true-wireless headphones and two Bluetooth speakers. The Air earphones are the firm's joint-most-expensive product.

Despite their modest price, these buds have voice assistance, touch controls, a wireless charging case, Bluetooth 5 support, an IPX7 waterproof rating and a choice of four tips bundled in.

Bluetooth pairing is incredibly easy (a voice announces "connected"), and during our testing the Bluetooth 5.0 connection never falters. There's no app here for EQ functions or updates, nor any noise-cancelling, but there's a decent level of passive noise isolation simply as a result of the buds' design.

During call-handling, both our voice and the caller's is clear and the driver housings respond perfectly to our touch when accepting or declining calls.

Fans of a grippy, energetic listen to get you through a workout will find much to

enjoy here. Throughout Eurythmics' *Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)*, Annie Lennox's lead and backing vocals are central, with due diligence paid to each musical strand as the Airs positively revel in the synth-heavy juiciness of the track.

While similar budget-friendly headphones can come off somewhat congested, here the design of the driver and earpiece (which doesn't sit too far into the ear canal) allows for a pleasant and spacious presentation.

Switching to a more sensitive melody, Elton John's *Skyline Pigeon* is a similar success story. There's the vocal on our left, the harpsichord on our right, and both merge beautifully halfway through the song, but never at the expense of the emotive lyrics.

Treble frequencies are not always as refined or insightful as we'd like, but we don't think that's a major issue for a pair of in-ears at this price.



Image credit: Earfun

Comfort, features, sound and price all hit the spot on this newcomer

The bass on Stormzy's *Big Michael* is enthusiastic, energetic and accurate. While the dynamic build is marginally less pronounced than through our control headphones, the Cambridge Audio Melomania 1 (see below), the latter pair is almost twice the price.

If you're after something inexpensive and comfortable that will sound good on the treadmill, there's nothing better at this budget level.

■ Cambridge Audio Melomania 1 £100

Given **Cambridge Audio's** general knack for producing top-level hi-fi, we weren't surprised when the company successfully brought its talents to bear on the true-wireless market last year in the shape of the excellent Melomania 1s.

Inside each unit, there's a 5.8mm graphene driver, a triple-core processor (including a Qualcomm subsystem to support both AAC and aptX audio codecs) a noise-cancelling mic for clearer calls or chatting to Siri/Google Assistant, plus Bluetooth 5.0. An IPX5 rating means they're water- and sweat-resistant too.

The Melomania 1 IEMs are truly wireless, so there are no wires anywhere except the little supplied micro USB cable to connect the charging case to a power source - which you won't often need. Also, there's just one button on each earpiece (designed to look like the Cambridge Audio logo), occupying its

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ AWARDS 2020

**BEST WIRELESS IN-EARS
£75-£150**



Image credit: Cambridge Audio

Long battery life complements a detailed and insightful sound

entire surface. A series of taps and presses will allow you to skip a track, increase volume and summon your voice assistant.

With nine hours' battery life from the buds themselves, plus four additional charges from the case, that means an impressive 45 hours of continuous use from this little set-up.

Most importantly, though, they sound great. They offer a cohesive yet

expansive, rhythmically driven sound befitting of their moniker - Melomania translates as 'crazy about music'.

Moreover, there is a surprisingly high level of insight and clarity, as well as an expressive dynamic range that can track grand shifts and vulnerable quivers alike.

As long as you can make these buds fit comfortably and easily (one or two members of our team struggled), then you won't be disappointed with them.

■ Sony WF-1000XM3 £169

The rate of progress in the wireless headphones market is such that the WF-1000XM3s might no longer set the benchmark for true-wireless earbuds, but they're still good enough to feature in this section for the second year running. That's largely down to their effective active noise-cancelling and real sense of musicality.

At the heart of each earpiece lies a Sony QN1e HD noise-cancelling processor. It's virtually identical to the chip found in the Award-winning Sony WH-1000XM3 over-ear headphones (see opposite page). As well as performing noise-cancelling duties, it also handles DAC and analogue amplification.

Battery life is commendable. You get six hours of playback as standard, while the case has enough power for an extra three charges, giving a total of 24 hours when using Bluetooth and noise-cancelling together. If you're caught out for time, just 10 minutes of charging is



enough to breathe 90 minutes of life into these buds.

The Sony Headphones Connect app gives more control over some of the functions of the WF-1000XM3s. You can see the battery level of each earpiece, alter the built-in equaliser, and flip the functions of the touch controls - useful for any left-handers who feel more comfortable this way.

The most impressive aspect of these little buds, we're pleased to announce, is their sonic performance. They provide a wonderfully musical sound, with

A neat design complements the Sonys' subtle and musical sound

instruments sounding natural and expressive, regardless of the type of music you're listening to.

They're subtle, too - able to dial back on intensity when required, but then only too happy to snap in time to faster, more aggressive and more intricate rhythmic patterns.

If their musical performance alone is not enough to endear you to these buds, we like to think their snug fit and stylish design will do the job. Either way, these Sonys deserve your attention more than anything else at this price.



Image credit: Sony

■ Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless 2 £279

These headphones are Sennheiser's second stab at the true wireless earbuds market, and they build on the balanced sound, decent features and good battery life of the original True Wireless.

Sennheiser hasn't gone back to the design drawing board, although the True Wireless 2s boast a few aesthetic differences, such as trimmed-down earpieces, from their predecessors.

There are four pairs of silicone eartips of various sizes in the box, plus a short USB-C charging cable.

The big news for the Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless 2 earbuds is the addition of active noise-cancelling. It's a useful addition and you can definitely hear the benefit; turn it on and it sucks out the rumbling and background chatter of the outside world almost as well as Sony's version.

Sennheiser's Smart Control app allows you to customise the Momentums' touch controls to carry out a range of



play, skip and other functions, and the controls are more responsive on the new version than the old.

Sennheiser's fabric-covered charging case carries 21 hours of charge, which can be used when the buds are running low on their seven hours of capacity.

We play Vampire Weekend's tub-thumping track *Diane Young*, and the Sennheisers are off to a great start. Drums are thwacked with a suitable amount of power, yet remain taut and controlled. There's plenty of space in the soundstage too, as the guitar and percussion jostle

Now with active noise-cancelling, these buds have really evolved

for position, plus an impressive amount of detail. In these respects they're clearly ahead of the cheaper Sonys.

The Sennheisers also show good control over low frequencies, as evidenced by the powerful bassline of Kanye West's *Welcome To Heartbreak*, although though the WF-1000XM3s have the edge on rhythm and timing.

These headphones have evolved just as we hoped they would. They are more comfortable and nicer to use than their predecessors, battery life is better and noise-cancelling is now included.



Image credit: Sennheiser

■ AKG Y400

£109

No sooner had we listened to AKG's new closed-back Y400 headphones for the first time than we were reaching for the laurels to award them.

Slightly smaller than the previous and rather splendid Y500s (and with smaller earcups), these on-ears have a 36mm driver in each earpiece – 4mm smaller than the ones in the Y500. The earcups rotate to lie flat and fold up inside the headband for transport. They are light, well cushioned and clamp on your head with just the right amount of pressure.

In terms of controls, it's a familiar set-up, apart from a new USB-C charging port on the left earcup, and there are few visual accents. If you prefer a splash of colour though, the Y400s are available in shimmery pink, green, blue and goldish-yellow finishes.

AKG's Ambient Aware feature is present again here, and it works well. When activated, playback is subdued and external noise seeps into our ears.

There's also an improved wearer-detection feature, which pauses playback when you remove the headphones from your ears. Bluetooth has been updated to 5.0 status (from 4.2 in the Y500s) and pairing is effortless.

One minor disappointment on the spec-sheet is the battery life, which at a claimed 20 hours, is down from the more impressive 33 hours of the Y500s.

Despite any reservations we may have regarding the smaller drivers and earcups, there's an open, layered and zealous presentation. We listen to Bruce Springsteen's *My Hometown* and the drums, woodwind and tambourine are pleasingly spacious, timing nicely around the Boss's textured and central vocal. Changing tack, we find Stormzy's *Vossi Bop* has bass weight and power in spades, while the bass-heavy sections.

We nod our heads throughout Eric Clapton's *Cocaine* as Slowhand's guitar is driven into our ears with determination

These supremely portable closed-back on-ears set a new standard

and drive across the frequencies, plus an extra ounce of detail over the Y500s.

These Y400s represent a top budget wireless buy. They're supremely portable and comfortable, well built, and have an energetic, expansive sound that sets a new standard at this level.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST WIRELESS HEADPHONES UNDER £150



■ Sony WH-1000XM3

£249

Until the talent-laden WH-1000XM4s burst onto the scene this year (see p28), these classy cans were turning heads with their engaging musicality and effective active noise-cancelling. And there's still plenty to commend them, as their inclusion here confirms.

Comfort levels are high and, thanks to the thick, soft cushion, it feels as though there's almost no weight resting on the top of your head. The finishes are smart too: Black with copper accents and Platinum Silver with brass highlights.

The right earcup features a smooth touch-sensitive panel rather than physical buttons. Double-tap the cup for play/pause or to answer a call, swipe up or down to change volume, and forward or back to skip tracks. And you can hold your hand over the cup to activate the 'Quick Attention' mode, which reduces your music to a whisper and lets in outside noise. It comes in particularly handy if someone wants to talk to you.

Noise-cancelling is superb. These Sonys block out more of the outside world than pretty much any rival, and replace that noise with some of the best audio quality available at this price.

Frequent flyers may also want to take advantage of the Atmospheric Pressure Optimiser; this tweaks the frequency response and microphone sensitivity for improved performance at high altitude.

Overall battery life is an impressive 30 hours. The XM3s can go from empty to full in three hours, while a 10-minute charge gives you five hours of use.

The really big deal here, however, is the use of analogue amplification. This provides an open, spacious sound that gives every instrument, effect and vocal room to breathe. Vocals are focused and direct, but the instruments around them are delivered in a way that makes it feel as if you're in the room with the artist.

Combine that spaciousness with great detail and dynamic subtlety, and the

Sony's legendary noise-cancelling tech plus comfort and great sound

XM3s communicate and engage like no other headphones at this price. There's also a generous helping of lovely, deep – but proportionate – bass.

Once we'd realised that no rival at this money offers this all-round combination of comfort, noise-cancelling and audio ability, our choice was an easy one.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST WIRELESS HEADPHONES £150-£250



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IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Sound quality is key, of course, but we're also looking here for comfort, ease of use and compatibility



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST IN-EAR
HEADPHONES
£50-£100**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Klipsch T5M Wired £69

Who doesn't love a hat-trick? Klipsch certainly does, we'd venture, because this Award makes it three consecutive Product of the Year gongs in this category for the company.

Two years ago it was the R6i IIs that hit the top spot, then last year the T5M Wired took over. And these are still the most comfortable, detailed and dynamic in-ear headphones we've heard at this price.

Comfort is subjective, of course, but we find the Klipsch earpieces aren't too bulky, nor too fiddly to get in place. Each one houses a 5mm dynamic driver and features a 5.6mm nozzle, on to which you can pop Klipsch's oval earbuds. The silicone used to make the tips is soft and offers not just comfort but also a great seal, which helps with noise isolation.

There are four different sizes of earbuds included in the box, so you shouldn't have any problems finding one that suits you.

Beneath the left earpiece are an in-line mic and one-button control. There's no room for a volume control on this model, but the upside is compatibility with a wide range of smartphones. Although Klipsch hasn't positioned the T5Ms as a sports headphone, it's worth noting that these buds are IPX4 certified, meaning they're both sweat- and water-resistant.

Playing Billie Eilish's *Bad Guy*, these Klipsch buds waste no time powering through the intro with a steady stream of solid, powerful and punchy bass notes.

The T5Ms deliver each one of those notes with precise, sharply defined edges and you soon hear the buds have a fine sense of agility too. The vocal bleeds into the track with a good sense of space around it, as does the track's constant background 'clicking'.

These in-ear headphones succeed in painting a nicely layered picture and once the track's bass line transforms

Nicely judged
bass combines
with crisp but
controlled treble

from a steady beat to one that dips and dives, the T5Ms follow it faithfully. Bass weight is nicely judged and you never feel short changed. Highs are crisp and controlled, with no trace of brightness.

These earbuds do dynamic subtlety too, with the guitar strings on *The Streets' Dry Your Eyes* dragging you through the mournful track. The Klipsch's natural tone and delivery help you get a real sense of the emotion in the music.

There's a maturity here that can be quite rare in earbuds at this price point. Mike Skinner's vocal sounds fluid and textured with the buds providing great insight. They also display an excellent sense of timing as the different strands of the song flow and intertwine.

Thank you, Klipsch; you've supplied proof that making vast improvements on the in-ears that come bundled with our smartphone need not require a devastating raid on our bank account.

■ SoundMagic E11C

£49

For a brand that was founded as recently as 2005, SoundMagic has moved up the sonic rankings swiftly, rising from obscurity to multiple-Award winners. The company's success is largely down to its affordable in-ear headphone range, not least of which is the E11C, here retaining the budget-bud crown that it secured last year.

The E11C earphones look the same as their E10C predecessors, having a typical cylindrical, aluminium-casing design and a choice of small, medium and large silicone tips. They also have a silver-plated copper cable to help reduce the loss of signal quality.

On the cable for the left earphone are the remote control and three-button mic. It's a standard affair that will work with Apple and Android phones, giving you volume and stop/start functionality.

SoundMagic may have updated the driver, but the company's sonic signature remains familiar. Simply, the

E11Cs sound really good. From the off, you're treated to a well balanced, entertaining, energetic sound.

Listen to Drake's *God's Plan* and the deep, sub-bass notes hit as they should, with decent depth and warmth, while the hi-hats tick along clearly at the top end. Drake's processed vocals sit comfortably in the midrange and, again, clarity is a strength from these in-ears.

Aphex Twin's *T69 Collapse* proves a more challenging workout but thanks to a crisp, not-too-bright treble, the track's energetic drums are delivered with life and control. The E11Cs are able to deliver a well-timed and enjoyable listen, combining precision with good dynamic range to keep rhythms in check.

The sensitivity rating of 112dB is high, meaning the E11C in-ears can deliver plenty of volume. It also means they'll use less of your device's power at average volume, which is always a bonus. That's got to be worth £49 of anyone's money.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST IN-EAR
HEADPHONES
UNDER £50**



Image credit: SoundMagic

■ Shure Aonic 3

£189

With the popularity and appeal of affordable wireless earbuds so obvious, why would you even consider spending this kind of money on a pair of in-ears that have to rely on eartips for noise isolation, an in-line mic for controls and a 3.5mm jack to connect to your smartphone (assuming it has one)? Spend a minute or two in the company of the Aonic 3s - available in black or white - and you'll soon understand why.

Radiohead's *15 Step* is a true test of timing that can easily trip up any speakers or headphones that aren't paying attention. Yet the Shure Aonic 3s absolutely nail it. Even if the track isn't necessarily your cup of tea, the Aonic 3s make it a delight to listen to. There's no sense of confusion, no jumbling of elements. These in-ears separate strands and knit them together in one glorious musical tapestry. The sense of rhythm and timing on offer from the Shures needs to be heard to be believed.

The same is true for their dynamic ability. On Billie Eilish's *No Time To Die* from the eponymous upcoming Bond film, delicate keystrokes of a piano combine with an intimate vocal that oozes detail. Bass notes don't protrude and highs don't cut too deep. The Shures are honest, transparent and true to the original recording.

We're big fans of the fit and level of comfort that these lightweight buds offer - thanks to the nine different pairs of eartips supplied, including silicone, foam and flange designs. You also get a 3.5mm to 6.3mm headphone adapter should you want to plug the Shures into a traditional stereo amplifier.

These Shures might not be the most thrilling pair of headphones we will ever hear, but they continually impress. We're struggling to think of a pair of in-ear headphones at this level that come even close to the Aonic 3 for transparency, detail, dynamics and musicality.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST IN-EAR
HEADPHONES
OVER £100**



Image credit: Shure

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PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

Music on-the-go doesn't have to be less than hi-fi quality with one of these portable music players

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYER
£500-£1000**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Astell & Kern, HakShin Yoon

■ Astell & Kern A&norma SR25 £649

The A&K A&norma SR25 is the latest in a long line of excellent, Award-winning, 'entry-level' portable music players from Astell & Kern - each new generation proving more talented than the last. The SR25 doesn't let its lineage down, setting a new performance benchmark.

The A&norma SR25 marks more of an evolution than a revolution of the brand's entry-level player, but takes significant strides. The SR25 supports native DSD256 and 32-bit/384kHz audio. In a first for an Astell & Kern player, the SR25 expands Bluetooth support to include Sony's LDAC codec alongside aptX HD and A2DP for high-quality wireless playback through a pair of compatible headphones.

The 3.6in HD screen is now more responsive, thanks to a faster Quad-core CPU and an upgrade to version 9.0 of the Android operating system. Music streaming service apps can be added via

the Open APP platform, and there are small interface improvements to ease navigation too. Thankfully, battery life hasn't taken a hit - at 21 hours, the SR25 lasts longer than any other A&K player.

The SR25 is aesthetically similar to the SR15, with its geometrically distinct form, hallmark side volume-wheel, top-panel 3.5mm and balanced 2.5mm headphone jacks, and microSD slot. Its aluminium chassis, now in an attractive 'Moon Silver' finish, has filled out a bit and gained 24g in weight. However, it could still be described as slimline, and is manageable to use with one hand.

The SR25's sound is familiar, rich, smooth and has plenty of detail, but the bar has been raised a peg or two, especially in terms of subtlety. Compared with its predecessor, the new A&K player more faithfully delivers The Tallest Man on Earth's *I Love You, It's A Fever Dream*, capturing intricacies such

The SR25 is the latest in a line of Award-winning A&K players

as the creak of his seat in the intimate production as well as paying greater dynamic attention to his exuberant strumming and the crispness of those leading notes. The soundstage has been prized wide open, too, allowing the track's scale to soar and detail to unfold.

While still an excellent player, the SR15 is less agile, less precise and less rhythmically assured. Musically, the SR25 is considerably more compelling.

A successor should, of course, offer some degree of progress and the A&norma SR25 does just that. It's marginal in terms of design and features, but not so modest when it comes to sound quality. The SR25 demonstrates just how good music on the move can sound, while also remaining reasonably affordable. Which begs the question: how much more can Astell & Kern continue to squeeze out of its entry-level portable music player?

■ Sony NW-A55L

£180

Sony isn't one to rest on its laurels, and by replacing its 2019 Award-winning budget Walkman, the NW-A45, it has set a new benchmark for affordable hi-res portable music players.

The NW-A55L is capable of playing almost anything - hi-res PCM files up to 32-bit/384kHz, DSD up to 11.2MHz and MQA. Aside from extensive file support, the NW-A55L is the no-frills player you'd expect for the money. The palm-sized, slimline design is unremarkable and the foolproof interface, while perfectly easy to navigate on the touchscreen, is a basic affair - more functional than fancy.

The absence of wi-fi rules out streaming networked files and from music services, although more of a shame is that Sony has dropped the FM tuner from this model. You can get round the first omission thanks to the NW-A55L's Bluetooth receiver, which allows you to pair a laptop or phone and play its music through the Walkman,

benefiting from its superior DAC and processing. You can also turn the player into a USB DAC, which acts as a sound-enhancing middle-man between your music source and headphones.

If you're looking for a sonic upgrade over your phone, the Sony will offer it across the board. It has a next-level maturity when it comes to delivering clarity, cleanliness and weight, and its well-timed sprightliness and more than a hint of dynamics save it from mimicking the often flat presentation you get from a phone's output.

Compared with its predecessor, the NW-A55L is fuller and cleaner, fleshing out notes (the bass is notably better defined) and presenting them with a more up-front sound. Sony hasn't carried out an annual update for the sake of it; the refresh is justified by squeezing even more performance into a budget price tag. But one thing remains the same: this is also an Award winner.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYER
UNDER £250**



Image credit: Sony

■ Cowon Plenue D2

£259

The Cowon Plenue D2 is the next-gen version of one of the most impressive budget players we've encountered, the Plenue D. Storage has been doubled to 64GB, which is expandable to 192GB with a microSD card. The PD2 also raises file compatibility to DSD128 - that support is native too.

The PD2 is equipped with a Cirrus Logical CS43131 DAC. This chip is designed for applications where low power consumption is important and has a built-in headphone amp. Cowon claims the PD2 offers 45 hours of MP3, or 30 hours of hi-res music playback from just one charge.

The PD2's sonic signature is as recognisable as its physical design and usability - clear, balanced and insightful with a confident handling of bass. But Cowon has made a valiant attempt to justify the £60 price hike with a performance that takes transparency and entertainment to the next level.

We play Jack Lee & Annekei's *Paper Moon* (24-bit/44.1kHz) and notice a

greater clarity, dynamism and subtlety to the rendition. Everything from the guitar rhythms and cello backdrop, to the smooth vocal and melodic harmonica is expertly delivered.

The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion's *Bellbottoms* kicks into being with greater impetus - there's extra space, clarity and subtlety and bass is full and tight.

The superior subtlety over the Plenue D really shines through on Radiohead's

The Cowon
Plenue D2 is a
superb-sounding
budget PMP

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYER
£250-£500**



Image credit: Cowon

Black Star, with Thom Yorke's wailing tenor sounding all the more insightful.

The extra space in the presentation allows for a more orderly, coherent display of the electric musings and reliable drumbeat that frame it. We haven't heard a better-sounding budget portable music player, nor one with a battery that lasts as long. And those qualities are sufficient for the D2 to take home a second consecutive Award.

WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYER
OVER £1000**

■ Astell & Kern A&futura SE200

£1799

The A&futura SE200 is the first portable music player to give the user a choice of DACs; there is ESS's latest chip in a dual configuration, as well as one of AKM's flagship chips. So, why does a music player need multiple DACs when one does the job perfectly well? It's down to letting the user pick the sonic signature they prefer, and also allows for further fine-tuning. Suddenly, A&K players have gained another dimension.

But while Astell & Kern treads much new ground with the SE200, it is on familiar turf elsewhere – file support goes up to 32-bit/384kHz and includes native DSD256 and MQA playback. Wi-fi (2.4GHz) is on board for playback over DLNA and from music streaming service apps that can be added via the Open APP platform (Tidal and Deezer come preloaded). AptX HD Bluetooth is also present for wireless listening.

Astell & Kern has retained its typical aesthetics here – the 5in touchscreen is

framed by an elegant aluminium chassis, with the side-panel volume dial the standout feature. That wheel now has an LED ring at its base that indicates music playback information such as the type and bit-rate of the track playing.

It's not often we have four headphone jacks to choose from, but we start with the AKM DAC-fed outputs (2.5mm balanced and 3.5mm unbalanced). This is the best option, serving up a sound that trumps every A&K player before it, bar the A&ultima SP2000.

The ESS DAC-fed outputs offer a fuller, warmer listen – preferable for lush, orchestral music – but sacrifices the spaciousness, clarity and those last few layers of subtlety in comparison.

Part of us wishes the company had put more resources into making the SE200 sound even better through one set of outputs. That said, A&K has still managed to set a new performance benchmark for the price.



Image credit: Astell & Kern, HakShin Yoon

AUDIO FILE FORMATS EXPLAINED

From low-quality MP3 files to hi-res FLAC or WAV, here we explain what each format actually is

Organising your digital music collection, you may be struck by the number of different audio file formats in your library. But don't worry, we'll explain the meaning of the most common music file formats, the differences between them, and why you should care.

MP3
MP3 (not hi-res)
Popular, lossy compressed format ensures small file size, but far from the best sound quality. Convenient for storing music on smartphones and iPods.

AAC
AAC (not hi-res)
Apple's alternative to MP3; lossy and compressed, but sounds better. Used for iTunes downloads and Apple Music streaming.

WAV
WAV (hi-res)
The standard format in which all CDs are encoded. Great sound quality, but it's uncompressed, meaning huge file sizes (especially for hi-res files). It has poor metadata support (that is, album artwork, artist and song title information).

FLAC
FLAC (hi-res)
This lossless compression format supports hi-res sample rates, takes up about half the space of WAV, and stores metadata. It's royalty-free and is considered the preferred format for downloading and storing hi-res albums. The downside is that it's not supported by Apple, so is not compatible with iTunes.

ALAC
ALAC (hi-res)
Apple's iTunes -friendly lossless compression format does hi-res, stores metadata and takes up half the space of WAV files.

DSD
DSD (hi-res)
The single-bit format used for Super Audio CDs. It comes in 2.8MHz, 5.6MHz and 11.2MHz varieties, but due to its high-quality codec, it's (currently) impractical for streaming. Uncompressed.

MQA
MQA (hi-res)
A lossless compression format that packages hi-res files for more efficient streaming. Used for Tidal Masters hi-res streaming.

WMA
WMA Lossless (hi-res)
A lossless incarnation of Windows Media Audio, but it is no longer well-supported by smartphones or tablets.

AIFF
AIFF (hi-res)
Apple's alternative to WAV, with better metadata support. It is lossless and uncompressed (so big file sizes), but not hugely popular.

OGG
OGG (not hi-res)
Sometimes called by its full name, Ogg Vorbis. A lossy, open-source alternative to MP3 and AAC, unrestricted by patents. This is the file format used (at 320kbps) in Spotify streaming.

HDA**ARCAM**

HEAR EVERYTHING

HDA – High Definition Audio, brings the ultimate in quality to the music that we love. And it is no coincidence that we've also named our latest range of amplifiers and players HDA. This line-up from Arcam brings high definition audio into your home, with unsurpassed clarity and enjoyment. Experience the HDA Series at www.arcam.co.uk.



View offers: whf.cm/BestSmartphones2020

SMARTPHONES

The smartphone has become an essential bit of hi-fi kit – it's now a multi-media hub for film and music lovers

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SMARTPHONE
OVER £500**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Sony Xperia 1 II £1100

With its glorious 4K resolution screen, Sony's sonic expertise and cutting-edge audio features, plus a great camera, this is a brilliant smartphone for music and movie lovers. The Sony Xperia 1 II is not cheap, but its design does its best to make that chunky price tag feel like money well spent. It's a sleek, shiny handset with neatly rounded corners to an otherwise angular design.

This Sony stands out from the crowd by sporting a 21:9 aspect ratio with a 6.5in display, giving it a long, slim appearance. This makes it easier to grip one-handed than many of the largest phones on the market.

Despite its large dimensions, the phone is relatively light, at 181g. There's a standard volume button on the right of the display, joined by a flat, touch-sensitive power button, which doubles as a fingerprint sensor. For those who prefer wired headphones, the increasingly rare 3.5mm headphone port is here too, on top of the device.

Don't think that, because this isn't an iPhone or Galaxy, you won't get top-tier specs and features. The Sony Xperia 1 II

takes Android-phone video performance to a new level – you'll enjoy pin sharp images, beautifully realistic and full of detail. Motion is smooth, too.

The front-facing true stereo speakers deliver impressively clear, if lightweight, sound. But you can connect your wired headphones here without needing a dongle. Any drop-off when going wireless should be kept to a minimum, thanks to Sony's LDAC technology, which aims to maximise performance over Bluetooth with compatible sources.

The Xperia 1 II successfully delivers the familiar Sony sound: agile, clear, rhythmical. Voices are close and intimate, but there's air around notes and dynamics when required. There's detail and accuracy, and Sony 360 Reality Audio and Dolby Atmos bring new life to smartphone audio.

Our focus has always been on audio and video performance, so we're thrilled to find a smartphone that does the same. The Sony Xperia 1 II brings a new level of performance, an excellent camera, fast operation and decent battery life. This is a phone for the true AV enthusiast.

The Xperia 1 II puts the focus on audio and video performance



Image credit: Sony

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SMARTPHONE
UNDER £500**



■ Apple iPhone SE (2020) £419

Apple's iPhone SE offers an authentic iPhone experience without the huge price tags of the upper-tier handsets. But how much do the sacrifices Apple had to make affect the performance?

The SE looks much like the current iPhone XR and iPhone 11 and feels like a proper iPhone too – those smooth, curved aluminium edges with glass front and back give the impression of quality. The biggest difference is the screen size – the SE's display is 4.7in, compared with the iPhone 11's 6.1in, and has thick black bezels top and bottom.

The user experience is as satisfying on the iPhone SE (2020) as it is on Apple's more expensive handsets. But there are compromises in battery life and on the single 12MP wide camera, which remains a solid point-and-shoot snapper.

The iPhone SE (2020) settles for stereo sound compared with the spatial audio tech on the iPhone 11 and above. The SE also loses Dolby Atmos support. The built-in speakers sound decent by smartphone standards, but use a pair of headphones and the iPhone SE (2020) delivers a much more convincing and typically iPhone-like performance.

The Apple iPhone SE (2020) does what it sets out to achieve. And although sacrifices have been made, they don't spoil the excellent user experience from what is the best budget smartphone on the market right now.

View offers: whf.cm/BestTablets2020

TABLETS

Intended for work or gaming, the tablet is an ideal portable device for music and movies

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST TABLET
OVER £200**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Screen Getty

■ Apple iPad 8th Generation £329

The **Apple iPad** 8th Generation is almost identical to its predecessor – both physically and specification-wise. It has the same 10.2in display, 8MP rear and 1.2MP front camera array, 3GB RAM, 32GB and 128GB storage options, and a 10-hour battery life. Even the Silver, Gold and Space Grey finishes carry over.

The 2020 iPad is powered by the Apple A12 Bionic chip also found in the iPhone XS, 2019 iPad Air and fifth-generation iPad Mini, which promises to be 40 per cent faster than the Apple iPad 7th Generation and offer twice the graphics performance.

But despite its seemingly incremental evolution, this iPad is still at the top of the tablet game. The 8th gen model retains the classic iPad look, complete with the familiar Home button with its accurate Touch ID unlock scanner. The top bezel also accommodates the 1.2MP front 'selfie' camera, while the 8MP rear lens is tucked away in the top left corner of the back panel.

The 10.2in screen is a good compromise between the iPad Mini's 7.9in screen and iPad Air's 10.9in display.

The Smart Connector on the left-hand side facilitates the attachment of the Keyboard, allowing the iPad to be used in landscape mode.

The quality of the 2160 x 1620-pixel display hasn't come on leaps and bounds, but it didn't need to. A punchy yet natural colour palette, sharply defined detail, and sleek smoothness all amount to a lucid watch. Thanks to a 500-nit peak brightness, introduced in the previous-gen iPad, it remains watchable outdoors, too.

The iPad retains the pleasing Apple sound – neutrally toned, detailed and dynamic – but adds an extra dose of clarity. It's a pity the speakers are still packed closely together on the iPad's bottom edge, as there's little stereo separation on offer here.

Apple fans might be perturbed by the modest progression made here, but it provides an affordable opportunity for those whose budget doesn't stretch as far as the iPad Air or iPad Pro. The new iPad may not be much better this time round, but it is better. And, due to its all-round excellence, it takes away this Award.

The 8th Gen iPad retains the classic look – and many of the same specs

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST TABLET
UNDER £200**

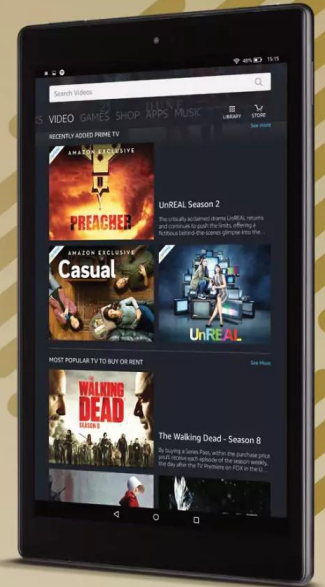


Image credit: Screen Amazon Prime

■ Amazon Fire HD 10 £150

The **Amazon Fire** HD 10 remains a compromise – that's almost inevitable at this price – but its performance means that it's one worth accommodating.

The Fire HD 10 is a big tablet (10.1in) with an impressive 1920 x 1200 resolution screen. There's a 2MP camera (plus a 640 x 480 snapper on the front), an improved 12-hour battery life and Amazon's Alexa voice assistant, so you can ask it to play music or tell the time.

The latest model, launched in 2019, has a faster octa-core processor, improved wi-fi, and a USB-C connection. Whether you buy the 32GB or the 64GB version, memory can now be expanded by 512GB. While it's great for Amazon Prime customers, the Fire HD 10 doesn't have Google apps as standard.

The contrasts, deep blacks and rugged skin-tones of *There Will Be Blood* (via Amazon Prime Video) are all impressive, and the Fire HD 10 demonstrates a decent facility with motion. Picture quality isn't the cleanest, but it remains reasonably composed in all but the most testing circumstances.

While you can expect only so much from the lightweight stereo speakers, sound through appropriate headphones is a much more assured affair.

If you can deal with some of the Fire 10 HD's caveats, its audio and video performance are well beyond the standard a £150 price tag suggests.

View offers: whf.cm/BestVideoStreamers2020

VIDEO STREAMERS

If you're after the best 4K content around in an easy to use format, try a video streamer



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST VIDEO STREAMER
OVER £100**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Apple TV 4K £179

The introduction of 4K and HDR, along with a number of other improvements – not least the inclusion of Amazon Prime TV, alongside other catch-up services such as ITV Player and My5 – have helped the Apple TV 4K video-streaming device retain its Product of the Year crown this year.

There's 32GB storage in the standard model and 64GB in the £199 version. While that may not seem particularly generous, as a streaming device, the only storage the Apple TV 4K box needs is for the streaming apps themselves, which are often quite small.

The menu system is nicely designed and easy to use, and the voice control is genuinely useful. You can even ask Siri to clarify some dialogue that you've missed, or supply information on the actors in your favourite films.

But the Apple TV 4K's biggest selling point is its library of 4K HDR movies. The catalogue is expanding at an impressive rate and currently includes more than 100 films, including plenty of recent blockbusters. The addition of HDR is also a big deal, as it makes movies pop from

the screen. Whites are pure and bright, colours are more vibrant and vivid, and blacks deeper and more solid. It simply makes for a much more exciting and enticing picture.

Apple TV 4K no longer upconverts content to HDR (a good thing, as some older content looked artificially bright), but everything is still upscaled to 4K – although if you're watching on a 4K TV that would happen anyway.

Weighty and solid sound

The Apple TV 4K streamer is an accomplished upscaler, boosting the resolution to match your TV without everything looking peculiar or over-sharpened. It sounds good too, delivering a clear, weighty and solid audio performance, which now also supports Dolby Atmos.

Apple has now addressed practically all of the issues that had previously held its TV box back, but that exclusive catalogue of 4K content continues to be the device's greatest strength. This is quite simply the best video streamer you can currently buy.

The Apple TV 4K box is the best streamer you can currently buy

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST VIDEO STREAMER
UNDER £100**



Image credit: Amazon

■ Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K £50

Amazon has upgraded its handy Fire TV Stick 4K device to the point where it is now the best-value video streamer available after Apple TV.

The big upgrade is support for 4K video, of course, but it's far from the only improvement: HDR has also been added, not just in standard HDR10 form, but also HLG, HDR10+ and Dolby Vision, making this the most format-friendly High Dynamic Range video streamer currently available. Alexa has been added, too, and proves more compelling than you might imagine.

Playing *The Grand Tour* shows off Amazon's production qualities at their highest. This is a sharp and detailed image, much to the benefit of the four-wheeled beauties on show. It's particularly bright and vibrant, too.

Switching to *Marco Polo* on Netflix continues the fine form, with impressive nuance and dramatic contrast. Blacks are deep and whites punchy and pure. Sonically, the Fire TV Stick 4K offers an impressively room-filling sound, with excellent placement of effects through Dolby Atmos and 5.1, and there's real weight and drama.

This new Fire TV Stick does everything you could reasonably want a video streamer at this price to do – and it does it all with aplomb.

LS50 Meta

Every note. Every word.
Every detail.



LS50 Meta

Introducing the successors to the iconic LS50. Building on the brilliance of the originals, the LS50 Meta speakers provide an even purer sound, which brings out subtle nuances and details you may never have noticed before. That's because our unique Metamaterial Absorption Technology eliminates the high-frequency distortion inside the speaker. So at last, you can hear music as its creators intended.



Listen and believe



View offers: whf.cm/BestOnEars2020

ON-EAR HEADPHONES

In-ear buds have their place, but for longer listening sessions there's no substitute for the comfort of the wraparound variety

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
£150-£400**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Grado SR325e £299

Invariably there comes a time in a product's lifespan when it has to bow down to newer, better competition. But the Grado SR325es - our current £150-£400 Award-winners - can carry on safe in the knowledge that, for them, now is not that time. In fact, these retro-styled on-ears are actually going up in the world, having moved from being regular price-category kings 12 months ago to snatching the Product of the Year title this year.

These headphones might not exactly be head-turners but they do bring a sturdy, solid build. Giving them a friendly yank does nothing but emphasise their flexibility and hardness. We have no doubt that, given reasonable care, they will reward with many years of good service.

Foam ear pads sit over, rather than hug, your ears, keeping them airy and cool. While some will prefer a tighter

grip, the Grados never feel loose-fitting. The headband can easily be adjusted with a sliding mechanism and, although it has no cushioning, it feels surprisingly lightweight on the head.

Solidity and comfort are important, of course, but the key thing is that the SR325es are as musical as they come, possessing a clear and weighty sonic signature. Play some upbeat rock and pop, and these Grados burst into life, lapping up any song's rhythmic energy.

Rhythmic energy

We start with Michael Jackson's *The Way You Make Me Feel* and the Grados burst into life, enthusiastically lapping up the song's infectious rhythmic energy. Each of the track's layers is distinct and well organised in a way that ensures a naturally cohesive presentation.

John Williams's *Somewhere In My Memory* (*Home Alone*'s signature score)

You won't find a more musical pair of headphones in this price bracket

is a delicate composition - a flurry of sprightly, dainty instrumentals - and the Grados treat it with a suitably light hand.

Agile and fluent, they breeze through the varied orchestration without a hitch and render the piece's youthful voices with crisp clarity and warmth.

Seasonal bells and chimes never sound bright or hard-edged, just beautifully sharp and well imaged. They are balanced, detailed and dynamically sound, and the tuneful, mellifluous manner of the SR325es makes longer listening sessions a true delight.

Of course, as with most open-eared headphones, they share their sound with the outside world more than necessary when you're on the bus, train or tube. But that is the nature of this beast - so if that's a problem, these are not the headphones for you. What they are, though, is dynamic, detailed and beautifully designed.



■ Grado SR80e

£89

If you've already read the review of the SR325e on the left you'll be aware that, as a general rule, there are a few things you need to know if you're considering buying Grado headphones. If you haven't, here's a brief summary of those things: they look a bit funny; they sound great; and they're a little anti-social when it comes to leaking sound. If you can get along with all of those factors, you're in for a treat.

That open-backed design is key to the performance of these headphones. It provides almost no isolation, but we have real affection for the retro design.

And we're certainly not going to complain when the cans sound as good as they do. Their dynamics, detail and clarity are all but unmatched at this price. The open-backed design helps make these headphones sound fast and nimble. Bass is clean and punchy and there's no sense of one frequency band bleeding into another.

And there's no fat to the sound. Neither is there anything to clog up the separation between parts of an arrangement. The SR80es can, therefore, jump between genres without any obvious flaws, always sounding vital and energetic.

These are lively headphones with excellent midrange and treble detail, as well as swift, deep bass for a pair of this size and style.

Despite their strengths, these Grados are not the most relaxing listen and some won't like the uncompromising nature of the midrange they present. The presentation is definitely up-front, with music starting close to your ears, but the open, well separated sound doesn't cling to your eardrums in the way it might with lesser headphones and clarity relative to the price is excellent.

If you like the style and don't mind the fact they leak sound, there's nothing better at this price.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
UNDER £150**



■ Beyerdynamic Amiron

£449

When you're spending this sort of money, you expect no compromise. Which is fine, at least as far as Beyerdynamic is concerned, because these headphones aren't in the business of making compromises.

A comfortable fit is not to be underestimated with headphones aimed at extended home listening, which is why Beyerdynamic has used alcantara microfibres (a blend of polyester and polyurethane with a similar texture to suede) and microvelour to make the earcups and headband. The result? You could wear them for hours without your ears ever feeling hot or uncomfortable.

We decide to blast out a rock classic, AC/DC's *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'N' Roll)* - the song's bagpipes are a good test of how a pair of headphones can handle treble. The Amirons take it in all their stride, keeping a good grip on the high frequencies without any harshness.

On the softer side, the midrange vocals in Fountains of Wayne's *Action Hero* come across clearly too, giving an insightful rendition of the way Chris Collingwood drags and emphasises the ends of his words.

There's no question that the Amirons can dig down into the lower frequencies either, even without the emphasis on bass that closed-back headphones have.

Of course, as is to be expected from the open-back design, the Amirons leak sound like a sieve. The upside of this, though, is a larger, more spacious quality to your music. Just be aware that other people around you will be able to hear whatever you're listening to as well.

Our final piece of good news here is that the Amirons are now more than £100 cheaper than they were when they won this Award last year. So, if you want a premium ear experience, buy a pair of these - and a year's subscription to a quality music-streaming service.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ON-EAR
HEADPHONES
OVER £400**



View offers: whf.cm/BestWirelessSpeakers2020

WIRELESS SPEAKERS

Whether out and about or a permanent fixture at home, these multi-talented devices provide versatility as well as great sound

WHAT HI*FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HOME WIRELESS
SPEAKER OVER £500**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ Naim Mu-so Qb 2 £749

Spare a thought for hi-fi engineers. While the front-of-house PR and marketing teams pick up the awards, these backroom boys toil away in the lab, constantly improving their products to serve a rapidly evolving market.

And, in Naim's case, we can be very thankful that they do. Not only did they bring us the excellent Mu-so and its 2nd-generation follow-up, they also created its cube-shaped descendant, the Mu-so Qb, which, in due course, spawned the phenomenal Qb 2 that we see here.

Visual flair

First you're lured in by the unit's asymmetrical curves, then you're wooed by that gorgeous rotary volume dial with touch-screen controls in its centre. But it's what happens under the skin that makes this wireless speaker so exceptional. Remove the grille and you'll find a three-way stereo speaker

combination with midrange and bass drive units, all powered by 300W of amplification. The single bass driver fires directly forwards, while a pair of tweeters and midrange drivers are angled outwards for wider dispersion.

Inside is Naim's premium streaming platform, also found in the second-generation Uniti products and the £20,000 flagship ND 555. You won't be short of streaming options thanks to Chromecast Built-in and Apple AirPlay2 alongside Bluetooth, Spotify Connect, Roon Ready, internet radio and Tidal.

You'll also be able to access files up to 32-bit/384kHz on your home network via the Naim app. This is also your ticket to building a high-end multi-room system of up to five Naim streaming products, all controlled by one device. Want to add your Mu-so Qb 2 to an existing Apple or Google multi-room ecosystem? No problem.

Striking looks,
terrific sound
and a wealth of
streaming options

Sonically, treble response is lively and open, truly sparkling after a little running in to match the richness of tone evident throughout the rest of the register. The overall presentation is muscular but lean. There's plenty of bass weight and precise low-end punch too.

The Qb 2 operates with a mantra of openness. There's an airiness to the soundstage, those angled drivers doing well to disperse sound. It also displays first-rate timing and dynamic range; it doesn't simply keep up, it thrives on snappy rhythmic patterns, issuing a sprightly performance anchored by its impressive scale in the low frequencies.

It can bare its teeth when necessary too, snarling as it attacks distorted guitar lines, but also has a gentler, more caring side when the noise quells to a whisper.

In short, we can't find anything bad to say about the Naim - this is one-box wireless listening *par excellence*.

■ Audio Pro Addon C10

£259

As if not to be outdone by its little brother, the C3 (see below), the Addon C10 here secures its own hat-trick by winning a *What Hi-Fi?* Award for the third consecutive year.

The Addon C10 is not only one of the bigger-sounding of Audio Pro's offerings, but also the best. The scale of the sound is immediately impressive, digging down into the low frequencies with an assured combination of warmth and punch, but also affording the presentation an extra dimension in terms of layering.

The C10 is equally adept at capturing subtler, more nuanced performances. Gentle, piano-led pieces aren't dealt

with the heavy hand sometimes to be expected from such a powerful wireless speaker. Instead, the C10 uses the extra room and warmth of that bottom end to paint broad but delicate strokes focused on dynamics and insight.

As a final string to its bow, the Addon C10 also has an exceptional sense of timing. The extra bulk in its presentation does nothing to slow its footwork. It not only keeps time wonderfully, but it also has no trouble adding impetus to the leading beats that define the rhythms.

This impressive unit provides a rich, powerful performance, with expert timing and dynamics. We wouldn't be surprised if it won next year too.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HOME
WIRELESS SPEAKER
UNDER £500**

■ Audio Pro Addon C3

£199

Here's another entrant into our hat-trick Hall of Fame, as the C3 claims this Award for the third time in a row.

And the accolade is as well deserved as it ever was because this is a neat package with attractive proportions, a carry handle and battery, although it isn't lightweight enough to be carted around in a rucksack all day. It's probably more suited to placing on a patio or putting on a desktop.

Wi-fi and multi-room are welcome features, although we would also have liked to see a USB port (as on the original T3 from which the C3 is derived). There is, though, an ethernet socket for hardwiring into your home network.

The level of refinement on offer from such a small package is hugely impressive. The C3 delivers the lead vocal from Chvrches' *Miracle* with a sweet and pure tone. At both high and low volumes the speaker excels, and has no problem filling a decent-sized room with quality sound.

The C3 manages to sound weighty, delving deep and rendering each note with detail and texture. By multi-room speaker standards, this is a remarkably refined performance.

The Addon C3 is yet another superb weapon in Audio Pro's arsenal of multi-room speakers - and a worthy three-time winner of this Award.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PORTABLE
WIRELESS SPEAKER
OVER £150**

■ JBL Flip 5

£100

Bluetooth speakers have never been more prevalent, so we're surprised that JBL's Flip 5 arrives with fewer features than its predecessor, the Flip 4. Gone is the aux-in port for wired listening (not a huge issue for a wireless speaker) but JBL has also axed the microphone used for voice control and hands-free calls.

That makes the Flip 5 essentially just a Bluetooth (4.2) speaker - with a USB-C charging port and cable - although you can pair two 5s together through the JBL Connect app to create a stereo pair.

Slightly bigger and heavier than its elder sibling, the Flip 5 features 20W of amplification. JBL claims it is waterproof to an IPX7 rating - a claim we test by

submerging the unit for a few minutes. Music plays throughout and it soon dries off when we take it out. Nothing has been compromised and all is well.

We start listening to Fontaines DC's *Too Real* on Tidal from our iPhone 7. Pairing is a breeze, and the connection never falters. Grian Chatten's vocal comes in centrally and clearly amid the tight, pounding bass drum, agile driving electric bass riff and expansive guitar chords. This is an impressively weighty performance through the bass.

The gentle piano that pre-empts Neil Young's 2009-remastered vocal in *After The Gold Rush* feels three-dimensional and emotive and, once the French horn



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PORTABLE
WIRELESS SPEAKER
UNDER £150**

It might be pared down in terms of features but the 5 sounds excellent

joins in, there's a real sense of openness and placement that the Award-winning Ultimate Ears Wonderboom 2 can't match - though the latter is slightly cheaper.

If you don't mind the lack of an aux-in port or inbuilt microphones, this is an excellent proposition for the money.

View offers: whf.cm/BestRadios2020

RADIOS

The original wireless has come a full circle and transformed into a thoroughly modern music box



■ Roberts Stream 94i £180

The Roberts Stream 94i has now won a *What Hi-Fi?* Product of the Year gong three times in a row, equalling the achievement of its predecessor, the Stream 93i. That should give you some idea of the quality of this lineage of Roberts radios.

Roberts has made only a few small changes for the 94i, including the addition of Bluetooth – the one thing we felt was missing from its predecessor. With that and a snappier new design, the 94i radio sets the bar even higher.

It has access to FM, DAB and internet stations, so you should never be lacking for sounds – whether from your local radio or connected to the internet via the built-in wifi or ethernet port.

Other physical connections include USB and 3.5mm inputs, while the Stream 94i can also access digital music over a local area network (LAN) in MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, ALAC and WAV formats.

If you have a premium subscription, you can also use Spotify Connect to get the radio to play tracks directly from the site's 30 million-strong database.

If you are looking to take the Stream 94i out and about, you'll need to buy the battery pack. It costs £35, but is necessary to make this radio portable.

Roberts has maintained the sound quality of the 93i, leaving the subwoofer at the back of the unit and the two smaller drivers on the front unchanged.

We play Dua Lipa's *New Rules* via Spotify Connect, and the attention to detail in the midrange is laudable. The Stream 94i manages to convey the lyrics' monotonous character without ever making it sound dull or disinterested. As she hits the high notes, there is never any sense of stress or harshness.

Switch to a DAB broadcast of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21 In C Major*, and this radio doesn't let us down. From the smooth clarinets to the energetic, rapid string movements, it handles dynamics confidently, with an iron fist keeping instruments distinct from each other.

The Stream 94i ticks all the right boxes. With the inclusion of Bluetooth, it's now the complete package, and that makes it the best value radio out there.

The Stream 94i has matched its predecessor's achievement

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST RADIO
UNDER £100**



■ Pure Evoke H2 £100

It's little surprise that Pure has won the budget radio Award – the company has hogged this spot for more than a decade. The current incumbent, the Evoke H2, is notching up its fourth year as a winner.

The H2 is a successor to a previous Award-winner, the D2, and while that unit suffered a little from a boomy bass, that has been corrected on the H2. This model now presents tight but deep low frequencies, along with greater clarity in the midrange – which is crucial for radio. This midrange means that the Pure can skilfully communicate the high register on airy, vocal-focused pieces, such as Joni Mitchell's *A Case Of You*.

There's a real feeling of solidity about the H2, which is available in either an oak or walnut finish. Round the back is a telescopic aerial and connections including a 3.5mm auxiliary input and a mini-B USB slot for software updates. There's also a 3.5mm headphone output.

You can preset up to 20 FM or DAB radio stations, with three quickly accessible by dedicated buttons on the fascia. The radio also has a built-in alarm clock and a countdown kitchen timer.

It will take something impressive to knock Pure off its pedestal; for the fourth year in a row, the Evoke H2 is representing the brand admirably.

View offers: whf.cm/BestCDplayers2020

CD PLAYERS

If you treasure your CD collection, the good news is that there are still plenty of fine CD players around

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST CD PLAYER
UNDER £500**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Image credit: Marantz



■ Marantz CD6007 £399

From the outside, the Marantz CD6007 is almost impossible to differentiate from the model it replaces, the three-time Award-winning Marantz CD6006 UK Edition. Thankfully, the engineers haven't taken things quite as easy as Marantz's design department.

The big news here is the change of DAC chip to an AKM 4490, allowing the CD6007 to process hi-res PCM files up to 24-bit/192kHz and DSD128, though you'll

Marantz has taken an excellent CD player and made it better

need to use the front panel USB Type A socket to get the files into the player.

The CD6007's build quality is excellent. It feels solid and operates with a slickness that belongs at a far higher price point. The disc mechanism is quiet and responsive, and we can't think of a rival CD player that feels as polished.

Aside from the front-panel USB, there are single-ended RCAs for the analogue output alongside optical and coaxial for digital. Marantz offers the option of turning the digital outputs off when they're not in use, which brings a little extra clarity to the sound.

Marantz also now offers a choice of two digital filter options for those who like to tweak. Filter 1 has a slow roll-off and is claimed to offer a deeper stereo image, while Filter 2 has a sharper roll-off and is meant to produce a more direct and brighter presentation.

These changes bring about an improvement in the sound. Compared with the CD6006 UK Edition, the new Marantz renders a more expansive and better-focused sound stage. Instruments stay locked in place when the music becomes more demanding. Notes are defined with a touch more precision, particularly at low frequencies.

Larger-scale dynamics are delivered with more verve and punch, and tonally, there is a subtle shift too, with the new player sounding more forward and a touch brighter. We can hear leading edges of the bass notes more clearly and there's a greater feeling of space between instrumental strands. We play a variety of music files through the USB input and the CD6007 copes with hi-res PCM and DSD without issue.

No one can accuse Marantz of pushing the boundaries on the CD6007; but it didn't have to. The company has taken an already excellent CD player and made it a little bit better. And at this end of the market, that's enough to ensure that the CD6007 takes the Award from its predecessor this year.

■ Cyrus CDi £1195

Things haven't changed much at this end of the CD market. Indeed, this is the seventh consecutive year the CDi has made these pages – we simply haven't heard a better-sounding alternative.

At the heart of this player is the way it reads data. Cyrus spent years developing dedicated transport control software with the aim of getting the maximum amount of data off the CD while also minimising errors – the company claims around 20 per cent fewer reading errors than any off-the-shelf alternative. The transport is a little noisy when loading a disc, though silent during playback.

We play Hans Zimmer's *Supermarine* from the *Dunkirk* soundtrack and the CDi displays the uniform, articulate and intuitive presentation we would expect from a premium player. Offering buckets of detail, it allows the percussive

interjections to surface, while the more intense parts of the score soar to a dramatic climax. Each layer is precisely unpeeled, and each instrument passes through the mix with a coherent flow.

Despite this, the player's rhythmic talent shines through. Pace and momentum is exercised with vibrancy. We are entertained by the Cyrus's dynamic agility and neutral balance, and the sound is impressively authoritative.

Cyrus has never been about compromise, and the CDi's solid build

Another What Hi-Fi? Award for Cyrus's high-end CD player



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST CD PLAYER
OVER £500**

and fuss-free, half-width design are admirable, although the basic black text on-green background display looks very dated now.

True to Cyrus fashion, upgrades can be carried out by connecting the CD player to the company's PSX-R2 external power supply (£795) for improved scale, authority and detail. But that's for the future. The standalone CDi is easily the best-sounding machine at this price. Its blend of analysis, agility and rhythmic precision is spellbinding.

View offers: whf.cm/BestMusicStreamers2020

MUSIC STREAMERS

Want some streaming action, but not ready to consign your other sources to the bin? This could be one solution

WHAT HI-FI?

★★★★★

AWARDS 2020

BEST MUSIC STREAMER
UNDER £500

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Audiolab

■ Audiolab 6000N Play £449

The Audiolab 6000N Play is as unassuming as hi-fi streamers come, with a screen-less, largely unadorned chassis that gives nothing of its vast network talents away. But, behind that modest façade, it has every right to exude an air of quiet confidence.

It arrives as the third component in the mid-range 6000 Series, following the 6000A integrated amplifier and the 6000CDT CD transport, borrowing tech and features from both its older siblings.

The 6000N Play uses the same DAC chip (ES9018 Sabre32 Reference) found in the 6000A amplifier (and the company's Award-winning M-DAC). It features ESS Technology's Time Domain Jitter Eliminator, which corrects the input signal to improve timing.

The 6000N Play's circuit design borrows from the 6000CDT in its isolated power supply and toroidal transformer. However, the foundation of the 6000N Play's streaming experience is based on another's creation, DTS's Play-Fi hi-res, multi-room platform.

That means that, when it's connected to a network through ethernet or its dual-band wi-fi, the 6000N Play can access services such as Spotify Connect, Tidal, Deezer, Qobuz and Amazon Music.

It also means it can stream hi-res music files up to 24-bit/192kHz from networked servers, thanks to DLNA and UPnP compliance, and can connect wirelessly with up to 32 other Play-Fi devices for a multi-room set-up. The gateway to all these functions is the DTS Play-Fi control app, which offers an intuitive, stable experience.

Audiolab and DTS have created a custom 6000N Play feature with six on-unit presets. You can assign a preset for whatever is currently playing by holding down one of the six preset buttons on the unit's facade. It's much quicker than using the app to navigate.

It also supports 'Works with Alexa', allowing audio playback to be controlled via voice commands to an Amazon Echo speaker or Alexa-enabled device.

Wide-open canvas

We play Big Thief's *Cattails* and the Audiolab reveals a wide-open canvas, colouring it with well-imaged detail lavished with a welcome amount of subtlety and space. It has the insight to capture Adrienne Lenker's distinct vocal with stark clarity, acoustic finger-picking is tangible and there's the dynamic interest to convey the subtle eruptions

The 6000N Play
is a great way to
add streaming to
your existing kit

in its folkly flair as well as the song's inevitable build as it creeps slowly towards a dense, frenetic climax.

As we play *Orange* with Lenker's vocal at the centre, the 6000N Play puts its articulacy and transparency to good use, laying down the vulnerabilities in her quivering delivery.

The Audiolab doesn't quite knit music strands together as tightly as the 2018-Award-winning Bluesound Node 2i, nor does it have its rival's warmth, but with greater clarity, openness and a down-the-middle tonal balance, it proves the more insightful and involving listen.

While music streaming has gained a hold over the music industry, not everybody is ready to consign their source components to the bin. And the Audiolab 6000N Play, with its price, unassuming design and streaming features, means you don't have to.

The Play is a great, affordable way to implement streaming into your system without compromising sonic quality - and with the bonus of being able to slip easily into your hi-fi rack. It's the best budget solution we've seen, which is why it takes home another Award in this category and, once again, is our music streamer Product of the Year.

Cambridge Audio CXN V2

£799

It's now been six years that Cambridge Audio's sensational CXN streamer has sat at the top of a competitive market. This is actually the second version of the CXN, but the changes from the first model are so slight, particularly in terms of sound quality, we're prepared to consider it pretty much a sixth win for one product, rather than a third for the new one.

There's increased processing power for a better digital experience, the headline being the addition of Google Chromecast; so it's less of a replacement than an improved prospect for future customers. Regardless, it remains the hugely enjoyable sonic performance that singles the CXN out.

It sounds fantastic – there's an enthusiastic drive to the performance, combining subtlety, snappy timing and rich detail. It's a punchy, entertaining sound that has a really good grasp of rhythm and low-end impact.

We've seldom heard a Cambridge Audio product sound so muscular. Bass lines are meaty and textured. The start and end of notes are precisely delivered, and there's seemingly no end to the streamer's energetic drive. The CXN is skilful at conveying the space between instruments, too, filling the room with easy dynamics.

The sound isn't overly smooth, but the Cambridge delivers a full-bodied performance that's pleasing to listen to.

Three Awards in a row for the CXN, or six if you count the earlier version

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
£500-£1000



The midrange in particular sounds lovely, with voices packed with character. The CXN isn't fussy with file type, it sounds fluid and dynamic with hi-res and Spotify-streamed tracks alike.

From AirPlay and Chromecast to Spotify Connect, network streaming, Tidal and internet radio, plus digital connections including USB, optical and coaxial, your options are near limitless. So, whether it's technically three or six Awards, the CXN remains a winner.

NAD C 658

£1499

As a combination of streamer, DAC and preamplifier, the NAD C 658 is a real Swiss Army knife of a hi-fi component. It uses the BluOS streaming platform, which was developed for Bluesound kit and has since expanded to other brands within the Lenbrook parent company.

You can access loads of streaming and radio services through the BluOS app, including Spotify, Amazon Music, Tidal, Deezer, Qobuz, HDTracks, Napster, TuneIn Radio and iHeartRadio. It can also access local and networked music, supporting files up to 32-bit/192kHz and including MQA, of which more than 250,000 tracks can be indexed.

There's two-way Bluetooth aptX HD, too, which allows high-quality transmission of the NAD's audio playback to a pair of wireless headphones. The unit's analogue and digital inputs include two optical, two coaxial and a single USB (fed to an ESS Sabre 32-bit DAC), plus two RCAs and a

moving-magnet phono for hooking up a compatible turntable. Its design means that all major digital circuits can be upgraded and replaced further down the line, while a future expansion of functionality can be accommodated courtesy of two Modular Design Construction cards.

The icing on the cake is built-in support for Dirac Live room correction, a technology that measures the acoustics of a room and optimises the performance accordingly.

A streamer, DAC and preamp – is there nothing the C 658 can't do?

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
£1000-£1500



Image credit: Nad

That feature proves its worth, opening out the sound and giving it a livelier disposition. Even pre-corrected, though, the C 658 offers a broad soundstage laden with clarity and subtle detail. The NAD shows plenty of energy when required, but throw it a more barren track and the focus and insight of its midrange comes to the fore.

The C 658 is one of the best-furnished, future-proofed and intuitive streamers we've come across, and matches all that with a class-leading performance.

WHAT HI-FI?
 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST MUSIC STREAMER
OVER £1500**
Naim ND5 XS 2
£2399

When Naim describes its ND5 XS 2 network streamer as entry-level, it actually means that it's the cheapest dedicated streaming source component the company makes in the range. But never mind entering at this level - if this is the best your system ever sounds, you'll be doing your ears mightily proud.

There are four digital inputs - a pair of optical TOSLink, one coaxial RCA and a coaxial BNC - and RCA and five-pin DIN analogue audio outputs, alongside two USB sockets and terminals for ethernet, Bluetooth and dual-band wi-fi aerials.

Of course, there is plenty else built-in for your streaming needs, including Chromecast and Apple AirPlay, Spotify Connect and native support for Tidal, while the streamer can also be used as part of a Naim multi-room network.

Being UPnP enabled, the ND5 XS 2 can stream files up to 32-bit/384kHz from any outboard NAS device or home computer, and it features Naim's latest

network card, which uses low-noise, low-voltage differential signalling to route the digital audio signal.

Tonally it is even, with the ability to dig deep into bass frequencies with ease and tempering that with rich and insightful mids and treble. It possesses that neutrality required to paint an honest picture of a track, refusing to force its own presentation simply to catch the listener's ear.

And let's not ignore the impressive detail on offer here. The ND5 XS 2 is as masterful at conveying timbre as

The Naim isn't cheap, but it is worth extending your budget for

anything for this kind of money. That applies to the breathiness of a reed instrument just as it does the shape of a synthesized waveform or timid croak in an intimate vocal performance.

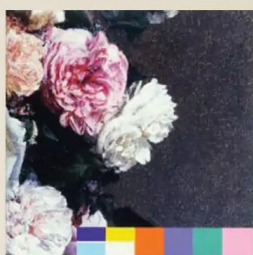
Timing is admirably precise, while an abundance of punch and terrific dynamic range make for an entertaining listen. The Naim conveys intensity as a track ebbs and flows, and also in the subtleties of a performance that bestow upon it an element of humanity. The ND5 XS 2 is the kind of streamer for which it's worth extending your budget.

THE BEST HI-RES ALBUMS ON TIDAL MASTERS

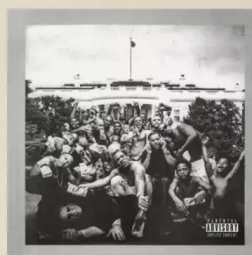
Our pick of the releases that benefit the most from being heard on the uncompressed streaming format


Orphée
 Jóhann Jóhannsson

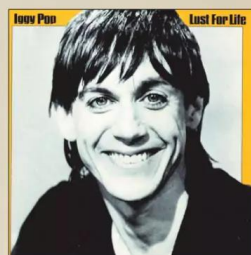
Jóhann Jóhannsson is a composer who almost alone could prove the necessity of hearing recorded music at master quality. *Orphée* is the final solo album released before the Icelandic musician's sudden death last year; at times hauntingly melancholic, its marriage of orchestral movements and light-handed electronics is permanently beautiful.


Power, Corruption And Lies
 New Order

Power, Corruption and Lies was arguably the record that defined New Order as being a band apart from Joy Division. Its use of synthesizers is far broader than on *Movement*, its predecessor, but still intelligently intertwined with guitars and acoustic percussion for a sound that is at once texturally dense and refreshingly spacious.


To Pimp A Butterfly
 Kendrick Lamar

Few hip-hop albums have influences so sprawling as *To Pimp A Butterfly*. From dub to free-form jazz, the backdrop to Kendrick Lamar's magnum opus is ever-changing, texturally complex and laced with subtleties despite its often abrasive delivery; this is an album deserving of the deeper listening that the master files facilitate.


Lust For Life
 Iggy Pop

Many of David Bowie's finest hours were spent the other side of the mixing desk - including on this, his second production credit for Iggy Pop. Songs such as the title track and *The Passenger* made this Iggy's most commercially successful album to date, and *Lust For Life* retains the garage rock aesthetic of *The Stooges* while treading its own path.


It Won't Be Like This All The Time
 The Twilight Sad

The Twilight Sad have never been shy of making a racket, and, despite its peppering of '80s-infused synth lines, *It Won't Be Like This All The Time* still revels in the kind of noise and cavernous reverb it's difficult to bend your mind around with a compressed reproduction; the added insight here is invaluable.

View offers: whf.cm/BestStreamingServices2020

STREAMING SERVICES

Have millions of music tracks and films at your fingertips with a streaming service

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST MUSIC STREAMING SERVICE

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Screen image Tidal

■ Tidal £10-£20/month

Tidal comfortably retains its crown as our music-streaming service of choice – and for good reason, too. It was the first service to offer hi-res audio streaming, and now presents millions of hi-res tracks covering a range of tastes, which it calls Tidal Masters.

The Masters offering is based on MQA technology, but it barely scratches the surface of Tidal's overall catalogue of

Tidal has more than 60m lossless tracks available to stream in hi-res

more than 60 million lossless tracks. In addition to music, Tidal also offers up thousands of Full HD videos, including music videos, interviews and behind-the-scenes footage.

Whether you're listening to 320kbps, CD-quality or hi-res streams, Tidal sounds great compared with its rivals. While the 320kbps streams just pip their Spotify and Deezer equivalents with a slightly richer, fuller-bodied sound, tracks streamed in lossless offer much more detail, a better sense of space and a tighter handle on timing.

Play the Masters version of *Dear Life* by Beck and the piano-led rhythm is executed more precisely than the CD-quality version. And that organisation and punctuality put Tidal's Masters just ahead of Qobuz's hi-res streams, which lack a little sonic cohesion in comparison.

The majority of the service's layout is exemplary. The top section, 'What's New', is headed up by featured content, and below are tracks, albums, playlists, videos and podcasts that are each sorted into 'new', 'top 20' and 'staff picks' tabs. In line with what has now become pretty much standard across most major music-streaming services, your own music (including your playlists or saved artists, tracks and albums) is grouped within the 'My Music' tab.

Tidal's availability is on the rise too. As well as being accessible via its PC and Mac desktop apps, web player (HiFi tier subscribers will need Chrome for lossless sound) and Android and iOS mobile apps, Tidal has expanded into Apple and Android TV apps, and Apple CarPlay.

Tidal apps also form part of several networked hi-fi products' offerings too, from Sonos, Bluesound and Denon Heos kit, to Linn, McIntosh, Naim and Cyrus players, to Google Chromecast.

With a library that rivals any other mainstream service, great-sounding lossless and hi-res audio streams, and good support across devices and platforms, Tidal covers all the bases.

■ Netflix £6-£12/month

Netflix just keeps on going from strength to strength, and as such, it was a relatively straightforward decision to hand it another well deserved Award for best video-streaming service this year.

Netflix continues to offer an expanding range of top-quality new and original content that was, at least in simpler times, more than good enough to keep the water-cooler chit-chat flowing at workplaces across the land.

Much of Netflix's content is now available in 4K and HDR too, all displayed with detail and vibrancy as colours pop and contrasts punch.

Other feathers in Netflix's cap include shows in Dolby Vision, Dolby Atmos and

finely rendered 5.1 audio. Though it is marginally more expensive than its main rival, Amazon Prime Video, particularly if you opt for HDR or 4K streaming, we think that extra outlay is more than worth it.

The bulk of its content can also be downloaded to your phone and tablet to watch, glitch-free, at your leisure.

Netflix is easy to use and is compatible with the majority of formats. PCs, Macs, Google Chromecast, any smart TV worth its salt, games consoles, Blu-ray players, tablets and smartphones are all on the menu. For ease of use, quality and library of content, Netflix is everything you want from a video-streaming service.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST VIDEO STREAMING SERVICE



Image credit: Screen image Netflix

View offers: whf.cm/BestTurntables2020

TURNTABLES

Even in an era of hi-res music, nothing matches the sound of vinyl, nor these superb record players

WHAT HI*FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST TURNTABLE
£500-£750

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Rega

■ Rega Planar 3/Elys2 £649

Rega's Planar 3/Elys 2 combination wins our Product of the Year title yet again. Though we said the same thing last year, and the year before that, once again no rival we tested this time round even came close to knocking this excellent package off the top spot.

The current Planar doesn't look much different from the original, dating back to the late 1970s, and yet every part of this deck has been carefully developed, leading to regular hikes in performance.

The changes between this generation and the last are significant, starting with the glossy plinth. It's far smarter and more rigid than before, with a pair of phenolic braces on the top and bottom surfaces that strengthen the area between the tonearm and brass main bearing, which is definitely a good thing.

The all-important main bearing has been redesigned to improve fit, while there are also upgrades to the subplatter,

platter, motor printed circuit board (PCB) and feet. Most of these aim to improve sound, but the plinth's gloss finish and the highly polished 'Optiwhite' edge on the 12mm glass platter simply add a touch of visual class.

That familiar-looking Rega arm, now called the RB330, improves on past efforts through having a new bearing housing and redesigned arm tube. This new arm also uses higher-quality cables with classier plugs. Still, despite the scale of the various upgrades Rega has undertaken here, the Planar 3 remains a simple, well-engineered deck that puts performance first.

Rega will supply it without a cartridge for £579, but we would advise spending the extra cash just for the privilege of having the company's long-running Elys 2 moving-magnet cartridge fitted. It's a good performer that suits the deck's musical character well.

The Planar 3 is a well engineered deck that puts performance first

Once up and running, it's clear that Rega's extensive efforts have paid off; the Planar 3 sounds considerably cleaner and clearer than its talented predecessor. There's greater transparency and detail too. Grand orchestral arrangements such as Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* showcase the Planar 3's organisational skills, with every instrumental strand kept neatly in place and composure maintained.

There's a healthy dose of scale and authority here too. Tonally, things are nicely balanced and there's a convincing sense of body. Large scale dynamic shifts are delivered with enthusiasm, subtler ones with finesse.

Some of the Planar 3's rivals may have a more etched and analytical sound, but nothing at this price is as entertaining. This version of the Planar adds insight and precision into an already-musical sound. Want the best-value record player on the market? Look no further.

■ Pro-Ject Primary E

£159

For the past few years, our favourite entry-level record player has been Pro-Ject's excellent Primary E. It's a wonderful back-to-basics deck that does everything we would expect from a record player at this level.

The Primary E is a moderate development of the five-star Primary we reviewed back in 2017, but importantly, this new deck, which also includes an Ortofon moving-magnet cartridge, costs £20 less than the original.

The Primary E's priority is clearly entertainment. It confidently nails the basics, from an even tonal balance to a clear, clean delivery that's spacious enough to keep things coherent.

Detail levels are pleasing for the money and the Pro-Ject has the skill to organise information musically. Body and substance cling to every frequency as reliably as the belt does to the platter edge, and that's made all the more enjoyable by a spirited sense of drive



and momentum. You'll have to move up to the likes of Rega's Planar 1 to do appreciably better in these respects.

We lay down The National's *Trouble Will Find Me*, and the Pro-Ject promotes the LP's warmth and sweetness. It's sensitive to the sullenness of the heart-swelling instrumentals, demonstrating levels of insight, and passable in the company of budget amplification and speakers. We ask

The Pro-Ject Primary E deck prioritises entertainment

ourselves what more could we ask from a £150 deck. The answer is not much.

Set-up is straightforward too. With the anti-skate weight and the 1.7g tracking force pre-set, all you're required to do is attach the belt to one of the two motor pulleys (33⅓ and 45rpm).

For those who just want a capable and fuss-free affordable turntable, the Pro-Ject Primary E is a brilliant buy - and it's an Award-winner once again.



■ Rega Planar 1

£249

This is the fifth year in a row that Rega's impressive Planar 1 turntable has picked up a *What Hi-Fi?* Award in this category. Much like its bigger brother, the Rega Planar 3, this latest generation Planar 1 has seen major changes over the years, despite outwardly showing little sign of the progress made.

Pretty much everything you see on this deck has undergone some form of modification, and there are also hand-me-downs from higher up the range. The Rega Carbon MM cartridge is now fitted as standard, and this is the first of Rega's entry-level turntables to house a 24V synchronous AC motor with an aluminium pulley, offering low noise and better speed stability.

It takes just a few moments' listening to realise the Planar 1 is a shoo-in for this Award once again. We've long admired Rega's sprightly presentation and it welcomes us like an old friend.

This is not an entry-level amount of detail: the acoustic guitar in The Tallest Man On Earth's *Dark Bird Is Home* is



complemented by the reverb in the first line; the distinction in treatment of each part is clearly audible, setting the vocal apart. Some manufacturers have a tendency to turn up the analogue warmth, but not Rega, so you needn't worry about being left wanting for body.

There is energy in the Planar 1's rendering of more animated numbers and a solidity that supports the subtler ones, while often its combination of

After just a few minutes, we know the Rega is a shoo-in for an Award

precise timing and broad dynamic reach makes its rivals' performances sound like half-hearted rehearsals.

No other record player at this price can better the 1's depth of engineering or its ability to bring records to life. It's a smart-looking device too. In these times of uncertainty, you could do far worse than to close the curtains, settle in your favourite armchair and spin a few records on the Rega Planar 1.



■ Technics SL-1500C

£899

Essentially an elaborate mini-me of the high-end SL-1000R turntable we use in our reference system, the Technics SL-1500C has wowed us equally at this mid-range price point.

It uses a core-less direct-drive motor with sophisticated speed-management circuitry, a hefty, well-damped chassis and a version of the company's long-running S-shaped tonearm.

It comes supplied with the highly regarded Ortofon 2M Red cartridge and is equipped with a built-in phono stage. There's even a switchable auto-lift function that takes the stylus off the record once the end of one side of the album has been reached.

Technics has been obsessive about the engineering details on the SL-1500C. That motor is designed to avoid clogging and the speed control uses techniques first developed for parent company Panasonic's Blu-ray players to help with stability and accuracy.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST TURNTABLE
£750-£1000

The platter is made of aluminium, but damped on the underside with rubber to control resonances. The SL-1500C package is one of the best we've heard at this price. It has a clean and precise presentation, one that defines the leading and trailing edges of notes with impressive skill. The presentation is composed and organised, and able to track multitudinous instrumental strands with considerable skill.

The SL-1500C is a mid-range version of the high-end SL-1500R deck

Its handling of dynamic shifts is pleasing too, delivering crescendos with enthusiasm but with light enough touch to convey the nuances in sparser movements. The built-in phono stage is superb, too, so you don't have to spend extra on a dedicated outboard unit to get the best from the record player.

The SL-1500C is simply a beautifully made, fuss-free record player that sounds absolutely great.

Image credit: Technics

■ Rega Planar 6/Ania

£1469

Rega still continues to feature heavily in this year's Awards, as it has done in many previous years. This is the fourth year the mighty Planar 6 has won this category; no rival has come close to bettering its combination of precision engineering and class-leading sound.

As with other members of the family, this is a product that has been carefully refined over the years to keep it competitive. Once again, as with its siblings, the Planar 6 has taken a particularly big step up in performance with the latest round of upgrades.

The previous RP6 came fitted with an Exact moving-magnet cartridge – an option Rega still makes available for £1259 – but the company now offers a variant with its Ania moving-coil cartridge. This a quality cartridge, so to do it justice you will need to pair it with a high-quality phono stage, but that will be well worthwhile.

The Planar 6/Ania combination delivers a frankly astonishingly refined and mature sound. It doesn't go for

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST TURNTABLE
£1000-£2000

immediacy to grab your attention, nor is boldness put to the forefront; instead its party piece is an unnerving ability to juggle balance, subtlety and timing in the most understated way.

Moreover, it seems quite effortless – the difference between having to play the music and acting merely as a conduit for what's etched into those grooves on the vinyl disc. The Planar 6/Ania does the latter with aplomb, drawing as

The Rega Planar 6 has been steadily refined to keep it competitive

realistic a sonic portrait as any turntable we've heard at this price.

Don't let the visual similarities with some of the cheaper Planar turntables persuade you that there's not much of a sound quality jump between the decks. Take the time to have a good listen and the improvements with each incremental price increase are clear to hear. If your budget extends this far, you really must hear this record player.

Vertere DG-1 Dynamic Groove/Magneto

£2850

The Vertere DG-1 Dynamic Groove deck/arm package offers a fair dose of the performance of Vertere's top-end MG-1 turntable, but at a more affordable price. It even has the option of a fitted cartridge, the Vertere Magneto moving magnet, for £100 on the base price.

The DG-1's platter main bearing and arm combination sits on its own separate sub-plinth and is isolated from the rest of the structure by precisely tuned silicon rubber. The result is an impressively smooth operation

The DG-1's motor is derived from the one used in Vertere's more upmarket offerings and is a 24v pole synchronous design. It comes with an individually optimised partnering power supply to minimise noise and vibration.

Changing speed from 33⅓ to 45rpm is done electronically by giving the stop/start button a quick press. Holding that

button longer stops the platter rotating. Set-up is straightforward - the cartridge comes fitted and, apart from setting the tracking weight, adjusting arm bias and fitting the platter, there's not much to do.

It doesn't take long to realise that the Vertere DG-1 is a terrific sounding deck. It has a bold, out-going sound that brims with energy and drive. We listen to Four Tet's *There Is Love In You* and are bowled over by the punch and power on display.

This Vertere DG-1 deck/arm package is highly entertaining

Bass notes hit hard and fast, but in a controlled way. We're impressed with the level of detail too. We haven't come across a rival that communicates the momentum of the music so explicitly.

As the package stands, it's easily the most entertaining option we've heard at the price. It delivers a full dose of musical thrills without falling short on stereo imaging, resolution or tonal accuracy - and fully deserves an Award.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST TURNTABLE
OVER £2000**

Image credit: Vertere

THE BEST-SOUNDING VINYL RECORDS

These records sound so good on vinyl that we can't help but spin them every time



Music For Films Brian Eno

Miles Showell has produced a number of half-speed masters of Brian Eno's work at Abbey Road Studios, but *Music For Films* makes this list because we weren't totally enamoured with it before we heard Showell's half-speed version. The sonic upturn in everything from detail to dynamics gives the music a whole new dimension.



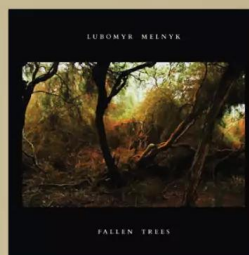
Director's Cut Chapter 1 Jeff Mills

Jeff Mills' *Director's Cut* project forms part of the Axis Audiophile Series, four tracks of reissues and rarities given the level of attention you'd expect from a meticulous master of his craft. *Gamma Player* from the classic *Humana* EP is the dreamy highlight, blending tight, deep bass notes with crisp, hypnotic melodies.



Kid A Radiohead

Whether this double 10-inch record was made for aesthetic or due to Radiohead being willful, it sounds fantastic. There's a boldness to the sound that is strangely euphoric, despite the album's often subdued phrasing, and a luscious quality to both electronic and acoustic instruments that creates an immersive soundscape.



Fallen Trees Lubomyr Melnyk

There are many benefits to listening to Lubomyr Melnyk's works on vinyl, but also the near hypnotic relationship between the pianist's continuous music and watching your record spin cannot be replicated. Melnyk released *Fallen Trees* at the end of 2018, shortly before turning 70. It is proof that as a composer he is still in his prime.



Arca Arca

Arca's self-titled album of a couple of years ago is an intriguing sonic collage, finding the line where music and sound art meet. Listening on vinyl, it often feels as though you can hear the needle picking its grimy textures from between the grooves. Just make sure your system is well enough equipped for when Arca goes low.

View offers: whf.cm/BestDACs2020

DACs

Don't judge them by their size – these compact devices can transform your system's sound



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST DAC
£500-£1200

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Chord Qute

£1195

You can't accuse Chord of lacking confidence. When this powered DAC was launched in 2018, the company called it the 'world's most advanced'. As it's bagged our Product of the Year Award for the third year running, it's hard to argue with that statement.

To Chord's credit, a superlative was really the only way it could go when naming a successor to the three-time Award-winning 2Qute, and the Qute justifies it. It's not wholly surprising, considering it's largely based on another Award winner, the Hugo 2.

It uses the same DAC architecture, software coding and frequency-shaping filters, but ditches the headphone amplifier and rechargeable Li-on batteries that make the Hugo 2 portable.

The technical evolution from the 2Qute to the Qute left this unit's overall sonic character – crisp, clean and explicitly detailed – unchanged. The

Qute offers more resolution, and its presentation is slightly bigger and more spacious too.

We play Peter Broderick's *Eyes Closed And Traveling*, and there's a new dynamic facility to our system. The Qute faithfully conveys the undulating dynamics, clocking the sudden surges as well as the subtler simmerings.

Notes have crisper leading edges, carry warmth and texture in abundance, and never decay prematurely – even when forthcoming notes tumble over the top.

Timing is tighter too, which helps the Qute sniff out a rhythmic structure, no matter what the genre. It is as happy rocking out to tumultuous tunes as it is rolling with classical compositions.

None of this is surprising when you consider that the Qute implements the bespoke FPGA (Field Programmable Gate Array) digital-to-analogue conversion tech found in every other Chord DAC.

You've got to be exceptional to bag three Product of the Year Awards in a row

It's a very Chord-like product, with colour-denoting buttons, which glow white for USB Type-B (capable of accepting 32-bit/768kHz PCM/DSD512); yellow for the first BNC coaxial and red for the second (24-bit/384kHz); green for the optical (24-bit/192kHz/DSD64).

The two coaxial inputs can also be used in dual-data mode, allowing the Qute to handle (upsampled) 768kHz files from Chord's Blu Mk2 CD transport.

Whichever input path you choose, the output is through a pair of RCAs. Chord anticipates the Qute being paired with a wide range of pre-amplification, so has made the output stage variable – you can select 1V (red), 2V (green) or 3V (blue).

It's tempting to ask: where next for Chord's 'budget' powered DAC line? But from experience, Chord will find a way to hoist the benchmark another notch. Until then, the Qute is still the DAC that rivals look up to at this price mark.

■ Cyrus soundKey £79

Standard-sized DACs are all well and good, but you can't take them out and about. That's where USB sticks come in; specifically, Cyrus's splendid soundKey, which returns for its fourth Award.

At one end of the soundKey, there's a 3.5mm socket for plugging in headphones (or connecting to a system). At the other, there's a micro-USB socket; there's no need (or space) for anything else. The Cyrus is supplied with two cables; one that has a micro-USB at both ends and another with a micro-USB-to-USB for connection to a laptop or desktop computer. Apple owners will need the Apple camera kit.

The first striking thing about the soundKey is that it's light and compact. It weighs in at only 18g and measures just 8mm-deep - which is excellent for portability. The aluminium casing looks attractive and feels good, and the logos are raised slightly to give both tactility and grip.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST DAC
UNDER £100**

The second noticeable thing is that there is a remarkable amount of space in its presentation. This is especially pronounced with quieter, sparser material - for example, a Spotify stream of Lotte Kestner's *Secret Longitude* is a particularly good showcase of the Cyrus's powers of separation.

The soundKey opens the recording wide, allowing even the tiniest of details space in which to reveal themselves. It also gives the tune a widescreen aspect that rival portable DACs can't provide.

It looks smart, yes, but the Cyrus also sounds beautifully open and detailed

We up the ante to a 24-bit/96kHz file (the soundKey's file-size limit) of Aretha Franklin's *I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)*. The Cyrus establishes a big, well described stage, revealing the character and technique of her vocal.

Comparison with AudioQuest's DragonFly Black highlights the soundKey's shortage of dynamic heft, but the Cyrus is far more revealing and more detailed than the AudioQuest. Don't bet against this little wonder appearing on these pages again in 2021.

■ iFi Zen DAC £129

iFi has built a solid reputation for its well featured, affordable digital-to-analogue converters. And thanks to a combination of features and sound quality that's hard to better at the price, the Zen is arguably one of its finest products.

This is a USB-only desktop product that takes power from the computer that it is connected to. If you need optical or coaxial this product is not for you, though iFi makes a range of other products that will appeal.

You don't need to be near a mains outlet, so it's possible to use this in the garden or away from the house. It's too large for a pocket but is well built with a nicely finished aluminium case and precise-feeling controls. It's also easy to set up and we get going in a matter of minutes, using the supplied USB cable.

The Zen can handle PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256. It can also decode MQA. There are 6.3mm and 4.4mm balanced jacks on the front, and a stereo RCA line output on the back next to another 4.4mm balanced option.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST DAC
£100-£200**

iFi has tried to optimise the sound for a wide range of headphones. There's a button on the front that offers a choice of output levels to take into account the large difference in sensitivity between headphone types, and another that adds bass boost. This works subtly enough to be useful, adding extra weight and authority to thin or lean-sounding cans.

The Zen DAC easily outperforms our MacBook Pro laptop, sounding clearer and more detailed. We listen to Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* and are impressed by the iFi's expressive dynamics and its ability to reproduce the

A blend of features and sound quality that's hard to better at the price

piano's harmonic richness convincingly. The leading edges of notes are precise but not over etched, and there's a good sense of authority to the sound.

Tonally, this is a well-judged unit, having just the right degree of smoothness at high frequencies to prevent thin-sounding music streams from getting annoying. There's plenty of punch and rhythmic drive too, as shown by Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*.

Compare the iFi with price rivals and it's clearly up there with the best. But it also offers a degree of versatility that those rivals don't.

■ AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt

£269

Once upon a time, the idea of spending more than £250 for a USB stick would have been considered foolhardy. But then the AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt came along.

There are elements here that are shared with the multiple *What Hi-Fi?* Award-winning DragonFly Red, including the 2.1v headphone output, bit-perfect digital volume control and MQA renderer, but there are upgrades, too. There's a more advanced ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip, promising a more natural sound, while the PIC32MX274 microprocessor increases processing speed by 33 per cent.

There's also the included DragonTail USB-A (female) to USB-C (male) adaptor for use with the growing number of electronics with connectivity for the latter. The most substantial upgrade, though, is the performance. Lines are drawn round the edges of each

instrument, with detail on offer to complement the cleanliness and military precision.

The Cobalt isn't necessarily concerned with polishing your music; bedroom recordings can still sound intimately lo-fi, purposefully screeching treble remains uncensored and grisly riffs still drag their knuckles along the floor.

Timing is greatly improved, with beats locking in like puzzle pieces, so much so that it can sometimes leave the DragonFly Red feeling a tad lazy. The Cobalt's hard work is also heard as it belts out grand dynamic shifts before donning its reading glasses to contour those more diminutive quivers.

If you loved the DragonFly Red as much as we did and you're looking to make the next step up without compromising on size or form, the Cobalt represents something of a no-brainer.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST DAC
£200-£300

Image credit: AudioQuest

■ Chord Mojo

£399

Not only does this excellent little device give your music that zest and inherent get-up-and-go that its name implies, it also brings 'Mobile Joy' - which is what its name *actually* stands for. It is the perfect portable DAC solution for those who crave Chord's Hugo 2 but stutter at its hefty price.

Three ball-like buttons take care of power on/off and the volume level. The power button lights up in different colours depending on the sampling rate of the input signal (red for 44.1kHz, green for 96kHz, white for DSD). The lighting behind the volume buttons also changes according to level.

The Mojo features micro-USB, optical and coaxial inputs, the last in the form of a 3.5mm jack rather than the usual RCA or BNC; and there's a second USB port for charging. Outputs are a pair of 3.5mm jacks. You can also add the Poly, Chord's dedicated streaming module.

Chord refuses to use off-the-shelf DAC chips inside its converters, instead using powerful programmable processors loaded with proprietary, built-from-the-ground-up software to do the job. It's largely why the company has enjoyed the success it has.

This is a fabulous performer. Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* on DSD is gripping from the unmistakable opening bars of *Too High* right through to the end of the album. There's ample detail, and the kind of insight that nothing we've heard at this price can better.

It might be quite the old timer now, but the Mojo hasn't lost it

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST DAC
£300-£500



Image credit: Chord

But what impresses us most is the Mojo's ability to organise all that information into a cohesive and musical whole. It can convey power and scale when the music requires, but also has the finesse to make the most of the subtler passages too.

We're also impressed with the Mojo's refinement. Its transparency means poor recordings (and sources) will be easy to spot, but this DAC won't go out of its way to be nasty. It's business as usual in the £300-£500 sector - the Mojo remains the one to beat at this price.

■ Chord Hugo 2

£1799

We're so used to seeing Chord's DACs feature in our Awards issues that it's easy to forget just how impressive these devices actually are. And nowhere is that more true than with the Hugo 2 – a more portable version of the Qute2.

The Hugo is portable in that it has a battery (providing around seven hours from a single charge) and you can pick it up (it's only 450g), but it's not portable in the sense that it sits comfortably in a pocket. Chord acknowledges the likelihood of it being used as a desktop DAC by including a remote control.

Its digital optical input (full-size TosLink) is good for digital audio up to 24-bit/192kHz, while the digital coaxial (3.5mm socket) goes to 24-bit/384kHz.

The final physical input is a mini-USB able to deal with information up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512. Music can also be fed to the Hugo 2 via aptX Bluetooth. There are 3.5mm and 6.3mm headphone



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST DAC
OVER £1200**

socket outputs, and a pair of stereo RCAs for connection to an amplifier.

As well as input selection and volume, the Hugo 2 features inscrutable colour-dependent controls for cross-feed and filtering. Chord's great differentiator, its bespoke, highly developed Field Programmable Gate Array, is back in supercharged form.

The bigger the file and the more information the Hugo 2 has to play with, the greater the detail and fidelity of its performance. But in all circumstances this DAC serves up a detailed, dynamic

There's nothing
else anywhere
near this price
that's as good

and punchy performance. Timing is perhaps its strongest suit of all – it brings absolutely believable unity to ensemble music. There's crispness and clarity, admirable management of tempos and an unequivocal layout to the soundstage.

It doesn't overstate, it doesn't underplay. It simply arranges the pieces into a convincing whole where bass is balanced against treble in the most unforced and crystal-clear manner.

There isn't another DAC around at anywhere near this price able to communicate so unambiguously.

AFFORDABLE WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM



Adjust placement and positioning

Hopefully you spent some time thinking

where to put your speakers when you got them, but it's worth ensuring you've got it right. Placing them close to any wall will reinforce their low-frequency output; an idea that may initially appeal but that usually spoils bass agility and precision.

Most are designed to be at least 30cm clear of a rear wall and a minimum of a metre from any side walls. Pointing the speakers inwards towards the listening position can help to firm up the stereo imaging, but go too far and the soundstage width will suffer.

It's not only speakers that will benefit from careful placement. Ideally, you want the rest of your kit placed away from your speakers (as far as the room allows) in order to

restrict any vibrations that can tamper with the sound.

Especially, you ought to avoid positioning your system between your speakers: though it might look tidier, and the symmetry more attractive, it can spoil the stereo imaging.



Remove the speaker grilles

Speaker grilles are great for keeping dust, pets and sticky young fingers away from the drivers but, for the most part, engineers tune speakers with the grilles off, so leaving them in place effectively places a barrier between you and the sound being emitted, even though grilles are made to be as thin and unobtrusive as possible.

If you have the energy to remove and replace the grilles each time

you use your speakers, you needn't really compromise either on the protection or performance of your speakers.



Support your speakers...

If your standmounters are still propped up on

the box they came in, now is the time to invest in some proper stands. Simply, you want your speakers to be as rigid as possible so any movement of the drive-unit diaphragm goes into moving air rather than the speaker cabinet.

For owners of floorstanders, make sure those spikes are screwed into the base of your speakers. If you have suspended wooden floorboards, a decent trick is to drill a few screws into the ground for the spikes to sit in – that way your speakers will stay rigidly in place.

Stability isn't exclusively to do with support, however; your drivers will also be bolted into place, and making sure every so often that those fixings are tight – while being sure not to over-tighten – is decent practice.



...and the rest of your kit

If you've gone to great lengths to support and isolate your speakers, you owe the same courtesy to the rest of your system as well. The simplest way to get your kit singing is to invest in a designated hi-fi rack, or you can indulge in a spot of home DIY.

If you go the latter route, just remember that the ideal support is perfectly level, perfectly solid, low-resonance and placed as far away from any sources of vibration as possible.

View offers: whf.cm/BestAmplifiers2020

STEREO AMPLIFIERS

Our top amp retains its crown from last year, but one or two talented newcomers have muscled their way into the amplification hall of fame



Image credit: Cambridge Audio, Jonathan Bushell

Cambridge Audio CXA81 £999

Cambridge can't have been unhappy with its CXA80; it was a more-than-respectable amplifier. Nevertheless, last year the company launched this replacement model, which promptly earned itself a Product of the Year status – an accolade it retains this year.

Although Cambridge's engineers kept this integrated amp's basic analogue circuit layout unchanged, they upgraded its signal path and the capacitors in both the pre and power sections. They also slotted in a superior ESS Sabre ES9016K2M DAC and an improved USB input that supports audio of up to 32-bit/384kHz and DSD256 quality. An aptX HD Bluetooth receiver allows direct streaming at up to 24-bit/384kHz.

On the analogue side there are four RCA ins and a balanced XLR, while the coaxial input will handle files up to 24-bit/192kHz. Its pair of Toslink optical connections take that up to 96kHz.

The CXA81 also has outputs for a pre-amplifier and subwoofer, as well as a 3.5mm headphone jack and space for two pairs of speakers.

There are many Cambridge Audio hallmarks here that make this amp broadly comparable with its predecessor, the CXA80 – only this time there has been progress in every regard. From the opening bars of whatever piece of music we select, we're greeted with the same powerful yet punchy, dynamic and astonishingly detailed presentation.

Confidence is key to the CXA81's performance, the amp hammering out staccato rhythmic patterns with assured conviction, snapping in time and allowing its expert handling of alternately loud and soft beats to lock in a groove.

Above it, a full-bodied and expressive midrange deals out melodies that are given space to soar, yet still sound definitively part of a musical whole.

Not just expert timing and fine dynamics; power and polish as well

There's a richness overall to the balance, too. This Cambridge is powerful and weighty in the low end, but lean and agile enough to dance around with the most excitable bass lines, while the treble is left plenty of headroom without sharpness or rough edges.

The CXA81 perhaps sounds a little forward, but its level of expression is such that it is sympathetic to more minimal, sombre recordings as well. Feed it a solo piano work or chamber quartet and it is only too pleased to show you its more caring, gentle side.

What really shines through though is a level of clarity that not only pips its rivals, such as the Rega Elex-R, but also makes them appear a touch cloudy. It is one thing beating the multi-Award-winning Rega amp for timing and dynamics, but to offer a more polished, insightful, and mature presentation takes things to a whole new level.

■ Rega io £379

While Rega used to make a high-end DAC called 'io', the naming of its latest amplifier is almost certainly a nod to the familial link with its big brother, the excellent Rega Brio. It's not far off half its price or half its performance - and so, quite reasonably, it has half its name.

The 30W-per-channel, entry-level io is instantly recognisable as a descendant of the Brio. In fact, we could repeat the same words we used in our Brio review, including "incredible sense of rhythm, punchy dynamics; agility, detail and fun".

Play Drake's *Money In The Grave*, and the io's natural sense of momentum comes to the fore, driving the dominant bassline forward. The rap vocal has the transparency, richness and clarity that demands it be taken note of, while the amplifier's innate musicality captures the rhythmic chimes that hold it all together.

It may not have the sonic sophistication of its rival and big brother, or that of the Marantz PM6007, but its

directness and buoyancy make for a truly compelling listen.

To pack such a performance into this price point, Rega has, as with all its amplifiers, stuck with analogue-only connections. The io sports two line-level inputs and a moving-magnet phono input, so you can hook up a turntable as well as a couple of other components. A 3.5mm headphone jack completes the io's fairly modest connectivity list.

It's analogue-only, but the io offers a detailed, rhythmic, fun sound

The compact, half-width aluminium chassis looks austere but feels well built, and the same goes for the satisfyingly simple remote control.

While this amp might not be as versatile as the all-inclusive Marantz below, those who are happy with a simple, no-fuss, purely analogue amplifier and who prioritise entertainment should arguably consider the io their number-one choice.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
UNDER £400**



Image credit: Rega

■ Marantz PM6007 £499

The path to self-improvement is never-ending: no matter how successful or saintly we are, there is always a way to better ourselves. The same applies to hi-fi - regardless of how good a piece of kit is and how many accolades it has won, there's always room for improvement.

Marantz is many steps along the journey towards making the best budget stereo amplifier possible, most recently with this new PM6007, which sets out to improve upon the 2018-launched Marantz PM6006 UK Edition by installing a new DAC into the PM6007, complemented by two digital filters that users can choose between when playing from a source connected to either of its two optical or single coaxial inputs.

While the entry-level amplifier still doesn't have a USB input or Bluetooth, Marantz has added a subwoofer output.

The PM6007's sonic character is as familiar as its casework: smooth, full-bodied and balanced, with a pleasing spaciousness. Where it pulls away from the PM6006 UK Edition is in its greater

clarity, precision and rhythmic punch. Marantz has traded some of that smoothness for a bit more oomph, as well as tightened up the bass. The result is a more spirited presentation, as evidenced by the dramatic opener of Portishead's live performance of *All Mine*, which comes through with more presence and sense of occasion. Move onto Högni's rhythm-driven *Moon Pitcher* and the layers of ambient strands are more cohesively entwined.

Textures take on new levels of tangibility, too. The melodic finger-

The PM6007 sees Marantz tighten its grip on the budget end of the market

picking underpinning Matt Berninger's acoustic-led *Last Song* is subtler, even if the PM6007's vocal delivery doesn't feel as rock-solid as that of its predecessor.

Happily, the phono stage and 6.3mm front-panel headphone outputs maintain the cohesion shown by the other outputs, even if they're a little short of the sparkle offered through the line-level.

The 6000 Series has allowed Marantz to have a firm grip on the budget hi-fi market over the past decade, and with the arrival of the PM6007, the amplifier line has been strengthened yet again.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
£400-£600**



Image credit: Marantz

Cambridge Audio CXA61

£749

The folk at Cambridge Audio could justify popping more than one bottle of fizz this year because two of their amps have retained their crown. Not only that, the company has also secured Awards in more than one category.

Part of the CXA61's secret is an ESS Sabre SE9010K2M DAC, which makes the amplifier compatible with 32-bit/384kHz PCM files and up to DSD 256 data streams. There's also a USB (type B) port alongside the usual coaxial and optical digital inputs on the rear panel. Bluetooth is built-in too, and it's of the better, aptX HD (24-bit/48kHz) variety.

Cambridge also courts the home-install market by providing an RS232 port and trigger inputs that can be used to help integrate the CXA61 into an automated system.

The power output is quoted as a solid 60W per channel and the amp has four line-level stereo RCA inputs on the back, and a 3.5mm jack for portable music

players on the front. While the basic analogue circuit design isn't much different from that of its predecessor, the CXA60, Cambridge's engineers managed to improve sound quality by honing the circuit and improving the quality of the components in the signal path. Those were crucial adjustments.

While still recognisably related to its predecessor, this revised model sounds more transparent and playful. It's simply more fun to listen to, regardless of the input you've chosen.

To call the CXA61 a fine all-rounder would be a huge understatement

This integrated amplifier sounds firmly in control, has enough in the way of scale and authority to work well with grand orchestral movements, and offers plenty of punch when required. We love the composure on show and the CXA61's refusal to sound confused or stressed when the music gets demanding.

Throw into the mix a well judged tonal balance, impressive stereo imaging, a whole load of detail and great dynamic subtlety, and you have a rare gem of an integrated amp.



Image credit: Cambridge Audio, Jonathan Bushell

Naim Nait XS 3

£2199

We wouldn't want to speculate as to when anyone or anything should qualify for the moniker 'old timer', but this reassuringly familiar amplifier is surely a candidate for that description. It's been around in one form or another since 2008, and remains the most musically enticing stereo amp option at this price.

The new phono circuit is made up of three stages - a gain stage, passive equalisation and final gain with active equalisation. The idea is to minimize noise while keeping plenty of dynamic headroom. The equalisation curve is custom, treading the path between traditional RIAA and the IEC alternative. This ought to deliver good bass combined with enough low-end roll-off to prevent rumble spoiling the sound.

When it comes to connections, there is the choice of stereo RCA or Naim's preferred DIN sockets for the four line-level inputs. There is also the option to split the pre and power sections should you want to slot in something more sophisticated.

As is usual for Naim products, you can add an outboard power supply - the FlatCap XS (£999), Hi-Cap DR (£1499) or SuperCap DR (£4849) - to improve the amp's performance.

The XS 3 sounds especially crisp and agile, impressing with a combination of insight, dynamic subtlety and rhythmic drive that's hard to better at this level.

Detail resolution is good, but it's the amplifier's ability to assemble all that information into a cohesive whole that really impresses.

With this Naim, music emerges with its emotional impact intact

There's a generous dose of dynamics and it is composed too, with a good degree of refinement when required. We also love the way this amp tracks complex rhythms.

It's pretty common to find that built-in phono stages aren't particularly good, but the XS 3's gives a detailed and punchy performance that brims with energy and interest.

If it's important to you that your music comes through with its emotional impact intact, listen in to this Naim.



Image credit: Naim, Peter Crane

■ Rega Aethos £2999

Rega's products are rarely revolutionary, so it comes as no surprise to find that the Aethos leans heavily on the electronic principles already established in the existing line-up, even though there's a lot of fresh work under that brooding exterior. Given it has a power output of 125W per channel into 8 ohms, you might want to think of it as an Elicit-R turned up to 11.

The Aethos is hardly feature-packed, but if you're happy with line-level analogue connectivity, there's more than enough here. It has five line-level inputs, a preamplifier out, a direct input into the power amp section that bypasses the volume control, and that rare thing, a tape loop. Let's not forget about the 6.3mm headphone output either. Those looking for digital inputs, wireless in the form of Bluetooth connectivity or even a phono stage will need to look elsewhere.

Build quality is impressive. The chunky styling of the new casework may



Image credit: Rega

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
OVER £2500**

not be to all tastes but it certainly feels rock solid and inspires confidence.

There's all the verve of Rega's established affordable integrateds here, plus a huge dose of extra clarity, precision and muscle. Dvořák's *New World Symphony* is delivered with all the authority we would expect, sounding unstressed even when pushed to high levels and uncovering an impressive amount of detail. All that information is

All the verve of
Rega's established
amps, plus extra
clarity and muscle

tightly knit in a cohesive and convincing way, making the overall presentation impressively clean and forthright.

We also play Laurie Anderson's *My Right Eye*, where the Rega's enthusiasm with rhythms and its impressive punch come to the fore.

Naim's Supernait 3 ran this Rega close here, but it costs £500 more. Whichever you prefer, the Aethos is a terrific proposition and has to be heard.

AFFORDABLE WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM



Maximise your power supply

There are various ways in which you can

better power your system. The simplest is to ensure the mains plugs you're using are clean (best done by treating the pins with a cleaning solution, but make sure they're dry afterwards) and all the components are connected as close together as possible. This means not plugging your preamp in on one side of the room and your power amp on the other. This improves system grounding and sound quality.

You could give your hi-fi a dedicated feed from your fuse box. This will bypass everything else plugged into the mains — from your TV to the fridge — that adds noise to the signal. There are greater gains to be made the higher up the food chain you go.



Upgrade your phono stage

This method is restricted to those

who have a turntable in their system, of course.

But even if your record player or amplifier has a phono stage built in, as with an outboard DAC, you could improve the overall performance of your system by upgrading to a dedicated one.

A phono stage provides extra amplification — the output of your cartridge can be in the order of a thousand times less than a typical CD player — and equalises the tonal balance, which, because of vinyl's physical limitations, is skewed heavily toward the higher frequencies.

It's an intricate process, so having a separate component devoted to the task really makes a lot of sense.



Upgrade your cabling

When it comes to cables, there are

those who believe using anything slightly more conductive than string will do the job and that spending extra on better quality speaker cables and/or interconnects is a waste of money.

Here at What Hi-Fi?, we have reviewed many cables, and all we can tell you is that the differences in performance between certain cables are clear to our ears.

That isn't to say spending more means you'll necessarily get a better sound, and those gains will again be dependent on the capabilities of the rest of your kit, however the relationship between the various elements of your system can be as much to do with what's connecting them as the aptitude of each component.



Get your system serviced

There are all sorts of things a dealer is

able to do when servicing your kit.

From giving your system a once-over to making sure everything is all working as it should, to replacing small parts that may need it, your hi-fi dealer should also be able to suggest specific system upgrades that will offer you the greatest sonic returns for your investment.

As you'll have read in our reviews on these pages, the best product for one person may not be the best for someone else, but with dealers knowing the products they stock as well as anyone, you can at least be guided in the right direction before wading through reams of reviews and testing every product on the market for yourself.

View offers: whf.cm/BestStereoSpeakers2020

STEREO SPEAKERS

From budget standmounters to premium floorstanders, these are the standard bearers for excellence



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £750-£1500**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ KEF LS50 Meta £1000

We loved the LS50s when they arrived back in 2012. Yet these LS50 Metas are better - almost unbelievably better.

They don't look any different from the LS50s; in many ways they aren't. KEF considered revising that beautifully made enclosure but concluded that little could be improved.

The only obvious changes are to the back panel, which has been tidied up and made to look neater. The Uni-Q driver array, though, has been thoroughly reworked, taking in the refinements KEF has developed over the past eight years and - crucially - adding something new in the form of Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT).

Here, the rearward sound feeds into something about the size of a hockey puck that looks like a plastic circular maze. It is layered and made up of 30 tubes, each tuned to absorb a different frequency. KEF claims that, once

combined, the tubes absorb a wide range of frequencies - from around 600Hz upwards - much more effectively than alternate methods. The result should be cleaner, less distorted highs.

And, sure enough, it doesn't take long to realise that the LS50s have improved significantly. The basic sonic character is instantly familiar, but the new Metas have gained a level of clarity and finesse the originals only hinted at. They sound so much more transparent than before and manage to render low-level details, such as instrumental textures, much more convincingly.

It's a full-bodied presentation with a good degree of authority for such compact speakers. Large-scale dynamics are handled well and there's a good amount of muscle for a speaker of this size. These are refined and composed performers that rarely sound stressed unless volume levels are high.

They look the same, but the Metas take the LS50 to new levels

There's little to complain about when it comes to tonality. The KEFs sound smooth and balanced while still having enough in the way of high-frequency bite. They will reveal the shortcomings in poor recordings, but don't go out of their way to be nasty.

KEF's Uni-Q designs tend to image well by their very nature, and the LS50 Metas generate an expansive and tightly focused soundstage where instruments are layered convincingly. We're also impressed by the image's stability when the music gets demanding.

We've always loved the LS50s but this takes their performance to a notably higher level. KEF is on to something with the Metamaterial technology and as things stand, that tech and all the other work KEF's engineers have put into the Uni-Q array has propelled the LS50 Metas to the head of the class at this level. A worthy Product of the Year.

■ Dali Spektor 2

£199

Some budget speakers use fancy design or obscure features to grab your attention. Not the Spektor 2s. These speakers have earned their place in these pages for the fourth year in a row by sheer conventional brilliance.

There's everything we would expect from a typical £200 box here, from two-way driver configuration and ported bass-tuning right the way through to the 25mm dome tweeter and 13cm driver.

But the stats say only so much. Let them run in over a couple of days and feed them with a good system, and these speakers truly sparkle. Mounted on solid stands and looking smart in their Walnut finish (Black Ash is also available), the 2s deliver a breadth of talent few similarly priced alternatives can match.

The Spektors excel with Aretha Franklin's distinctive and powerful vocals in *Natural Woman*. They're delivered with nuance and passion, each

word crisply defined with no room for doubt as to the emotion behind the lyrics. We like the cohesive way the speakers handle the instrumental backdrop too, delivering the music with finesse, precision and energy.

Dynamics here are impressive. They're fluid and expressive, rendering both large-scale swings and low-level subtleties with equal verve. The result is that these Dalis have the ability to draw

The Spektor 2s are a fuss-free bargain: both detailed and entertaining

the listener in to the music in a way that eludes even the best of their rivals.

Tonally, the Spektor 2s have a full-bodied yet balanced presentation. This means they're easy to partner and less fussy about rough or overly aggressive recordings.

If you're looking to get the best speakers you can buy for less than £200, nothing else will give you such a well judged blend of detail and entertainment.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER UNDER £200**

■ Elac Debut B5.2

£279

Elac changed almost everything about its second generation of Debut speakers. These, the range's entry-level offering, represent quite stunning value for money, and the B5.2s take this Award for the second time.

The cabinets are a similar volume to before, but they're now taller, narrower and deeper in a bid to look smarter and be less visually obtrusive. The 13cm mid/bass unit is thoroughly revised too, using a new blend of aramid fibres for the cone, combined with a different shape to improve stiffness and damping. That the dust cap is now convex rather than concave will strike most as a minor detail, but it has benefits at the top end of the driver's operating range and helps integration with the tweeter.

That tweeter is a wide-surround design with improved dispersion, and a top-end response that extends to a claimed 35kHz. The reflex port has moved to the front to make the speakers less sensitive to their proximity to the rear wall, which makes placement easier.

The B5.2s have no trouble coping with dense instrumentation or complex rhythms. Expressive performers, they sound with a precision and cohesion that's rare for this level.

Tonally, they're even-handed and admirably balanced in the way they deal with poorer, more aggressive recordings, also pulling ahead of rivals when it comes to insight and composure.

Expressive, precise performers, the B5.2 are fine value for money

You can enjoy a wide range of music, too. They have the dynamic expression, detail resolution and tonal sophistication to handle it all, and enough stretch in their abilities to get better even when the rest of the system is upgraded.

The Debut B5.2 speakers should be considered one of Elac's finest efforts – a category Best Buy all the way.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £200-£400**

■ Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2 Anniversary Edition

£599

The Bowers & Wilkins 606s walked off with *What Hi-Fi?*'s top speaker award in 2019. So it comes as something of a surprise that they've been replaced within two years. Why so soon?

Well, the 600 range is now 25 years old. To mark the anniversary, B&W has decided to upgrade the core models.

On paper, the low-key nature of the revisions leaves us underwhelmed. The only performance related change is an upgraded crossover that now features better-quality capacitors, some of which were originally seen in the recently announced and more premium 700 Signature series.

Given the modest nature of the engineering changes we weren't expecting much of a difference in the sound. We were wrong. The 606 S2 Anniversary Editions prove significantly more capable than their predecessors.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £400-£750**

The biggest differences are in the bass. The new version is so much more precise and controlled in this region. Move up the frequency range and the steps up in articulation and clarity are striking. The Series 2 offers a clearer view of the recording and sounds more balanced overall.

Their presentation is tauter, and a little more forward than the originals, but also sounds more natural and

The Anniversary edition is a worthy birthday present to the 600

transparent. Along with improved muscle, we find it easier to track low-level instrumental strands and pick up on fine detail. The new model conveys instrumental textures with more skill and locates instruments within the sound stage with greater stability.

The original 606s are fine speakers, but this new version is obviously better across the board. Those minor changes have made a surprisingly big difference.

■ ProAc Response D2R

£2895

ProAc has long offered the choice of a ribbon tweeter instead of a dome unit in its Response floorstanders, but this is the first time buyers of the standmounters have had such a choice.

When we take a close look at these new D2Rs, we're struck by just how contemporary they seem; after all they're based on a design over a decade old. Sure there's no curved cabinet here or particularly fancy cone materials, but such things certainly don't guarantee a great sound in our experience.

The big headline is the use of the ribbon tweeter. We generally find that the ribbon option gives a clearly more transparent and detailed sound, one that's well worth the price premium.

And these are wonderfully expressive speakers, even at low volumes. We play Melody Gardot's *Mira* and they respond with an agile, lively performance that mixes information with entertainment as well as anything we've heard at the price.

Their midrange is a real highlight, delivering rich, playful tones with considerable skill, and conveying nuance and vocal textures superbly.

These aren't particularly big speakers so really deep bass isn't on the menu, but for their size, the low-end is impressive - deep and authoritative.

That ribbon tweeter shines in the amount of detail it resolves, and unlike

That ribbon tweeter is a first for a ProAc standmounter

similar designs avoids sounding a little sterile and tonally grey. The integration with the mid/bass is handled seamlessly and there's a consistency of character from the lowest frequency upward that's impressive.

Given suitably talented partners, the Response D2Rs excel at giving the music the limelight. We can't ask any more than that.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £1500+**

■ Fyne Audio F302

£480

These **F302 floorstanders** were among the first speakers we heard from relative newcomer Fyne Audio. They have made a good enough impression to make it an impressive three years in a row now to the top spot for floorstanders at less than £500.

A two-way, rear-ported design, they house a 25mm polyester-dome tweeter and 15cm multi-fibre mid/bass driver in each of the sturdy cabinets. With the plinths adding a little more width to the overall footprint, it feels you're getting a lot of speaker for the money.

It doesn't take long to conclude that these are class leaders. We listen to albums from beginning to end – an acid test that's passed by only the most engaging products. We play Bon Iver's *22, A Million* and from the outset we're met with a confident, forward presentation – but one with all the detail and refinement we might expect from the best standmounters at this price.

The texture in those opening vocal loops offers a sense of movement and anticipation over a flatlining drone, and quite luscious warmth to Justin Vernon's trademark choral harmonies. The presentation feels spacious, both in terms of width and depth. While it's also full bodied, the bass is taut and doesn't obstruct the F302s' keen rhythmic sense.

It's nice to hear insight, precise timing and a wide dynamic range given as much prominence as power, bass and a wide soundstage in such a modestly priced floorstander. The Fynes are also adept at capturing the production as well as the character of the music. This is a mature sonic performance indeed.

It's rare to find floorstanding all-rounders at less than £500 able to compete favourably in every respect with the wealth of quality standmounts available at the same price, but these do.



WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER UNDER £500**

■ Dali Oberon 5

£699

Dali's wonderful **Oberon 5** floorstanders have made this a magnificent three-peat of Best Buy wins at this price category.

There are no magic ingredients here, there's no cutting edge technology to explain the Oberon 5s' unusually talented nature. Just careful engineering and steady refinements of design ideas that Dali has pursued across its ranges for years, but in this case honed to get the best performance at the price.

Once run in, these speakers reveal themselves as terrific performers. They're responsive, musical – but, most of all, fun. They sound right at home among the complex rhythms and dense production of Radiohead's *In Rainbows*.

But they bring out the emotion too, highlighting the haunting nature of *Videotape* or the uplifting gear-change in *15 Step's* instrumental break.

The Oberon 5s have the dynamic subtlety, rhythmic precision and sheer transparency to make the most of such things and really draw the listener in.

They're detailed too, revealing low-level instrumental strands with ease, but also managing to arrange that information in a composed and organised way. The sound simply flows in an organic and convincing manner.

Particularly striking is a crisp, biting treble that never becomes brittle or shrill. It also blends seamlessly with the expressive midrange. The Oberons sound great with voices, squeezing the last drop of emotional impact from Nina Simone's heart-breaking *Strange Fruit*.

We move on to Prokofiev's *Romeo And Juliet*, where the Dalis show-off their fine dynamic reach and ability to render low-level shifts with skill. Those twin mid/bass drivers deliver plenty in the way of low-frequency punch and authority, and go loud enough in all but the very largest of domestic settings.

If you have a simply enormous listening room, you may need to consider larger, more powerful alternatives; for most people, there's nothing not to like about the Oberon 5s.



WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £500-£1000**

■ Wharfedale Evo 4.4

£1199

The Evo 4.4, the biggest and priciest offerings in Wharfedale's new Evo range, pick up this Award for the second year in a row. They are packed full of so much technology that we had to double-check the price tag to make sure it was for a pair of speakers, rather than just one.

There's the Air Motion Transformer tweeter for starters. It's a type of design more usually seen at far higher prices, working by having a light, pleated diaphragm driven across its surface by a row of carefully placed magnets. The pleats contract or expand according to the music signal, squeezing the air between them in the process to create the soundwave.

The AMT unit hands over to another unusual drive unit: a dome midrange.

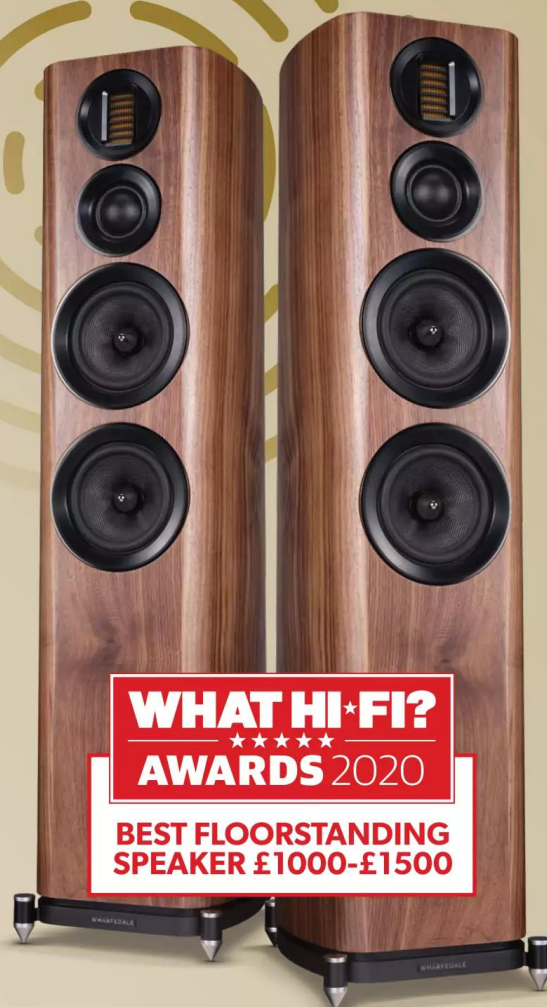
Few speakers use them because of the cost and difficulty of development. The one used in the 4.4 has a 50mm soft dome coated with a damping compound to control resonances, with a specially

shaped chamber behind the dome that scatters and absorbs the diaphragm's rearward sound.

This dome midrange unit has a wide frequency response ranging from 800Hz to 5kHz, which, along with the powerful motor system, helps it integrate with the AMT tweeter as well as the twin woven Kevlar bass drivers that sit below it in the nicely made cabinet.

The output of the last two drivers is helped by a downward-facing port arrangement where the low-frequency sound fires out through a gap between the base of the speaker cabinet and the floor plinth.

The result is a natural and easy-going presentation that, with some energetic partnering kit, has the ability to both soothe and excite. Its timing and organisation is precise, with the ability to really drive home a beat when you give it some power, and its control of dynamics is second to none at this price.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £1000-£1500**

Image credit: Wharfedale

■ ProAc Response DT8

£2295

It's three Awards in a row for the Response DT8, as these towers turn in as musically cohesive a performance as we've heard at this price.

The use of two types of 16.5cm mid/bass driver working in tandem may be clever from an engineering point of view, but visually it unsettles us, we must confess.

By using different drivers working in tandem, ProAc's engineers have attempted to get the best of all worlds. A polypropylene cone in the top unit shoots for natural mids; a stiff poly mica diaphragm in the lower aims to deliver powerful, articulate bass. A down-firing port completes the arrangement.

We play Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and the DT8s respond with a large-scale sound full of force and fury. They deliver the music's high-octane dynamic swings with enthusiasm and plenty of punch, yet have the skill to render the subtleties with care.

Tonally, they are a little forward, but they have enough by way of refinement

to prevent this being an issue. We would avoid pairing them with any overly bright or aggressive electronics, though.

Detail levels are high, the DT8s able to resolve layers of information and organise it in a cohesive manner. They render instrumental texture superbly, and deliver slight changes in intensity and drive well.

Stereo imaging is lovely too. These speakers paint on an expansive sonic canvas, locating instruments with precision and stability. The orchestra is laid out convincingly, with the sound extending well beyond the space between the speakers.

While the presence of two different mid/bass drivers caused us to have doubts at first, we're impressed by the DT8's expressive and transparent midrange performance.

We think you'll love the entertaining, articulate sound of these ProAc floorstanders. At this price, as three years of Best Buy Awards signals, we wouldn't want anything else.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £1500-£2500**

■ Spendor A7

£3300

The Spendor A7s sound great, they look great, and they're compact enough to fit into most homes. They have also now won this Best Buy Award for the third time, so it's clear that we rate them extremely highly.

There's nothing flash about the A7s; standing 93cm tall, they exude a simple elegance. Build quality is first-rate. You can choose Black Ash, Dark Walnut or Natural Oak for the wood veneer finish; and there's a Satin White option, yours for an extra £300.

These are two-way speakers. Each has an 18cm mid/bass driver and a 22mm tweeter with a wide surround which helps disperse the sound further.

Position them correctly – around 20-30cm from a wall – and you'll reap the rewards. The Spondors have rear-firing slot-shaped reflex ports to reduce noise and distortion, and to give better grip on bass than a conventional tube-shaped port can generally manage.

This is a big sound, packed with insight and great dynamics. Detail levels are fantastic, with each instrumental strand and vocal quirk laid bare. The sound is terrifically clean and organised, but where other Spondors prioritise refinement, these A7s also pack in bags of punch to keep things sounding lively.

They are wonderfully expressive as well, vocals being a particular highlight.

Despite their relatively compact size, these speakers also go satisfyingly deep, and keep a firm grip on the bassline of Massive Attack's *Angel*. Each note is pulled taut, and the edges are precise but wrapped in layers of texture.

More raucous tunes could perhaps do with a bit more brawn behind them – but that's a trifling concern against the A7s' stunning precision, clarity and subtlety.

Factor in their hugely enjoyable dynamics and flair for rhythm and we're sold on them as our top premium speaker choice.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER OVER £2500**

■ Ruark MR1 Mk2

£2295

It's now four Awards in a row for Ruark here as the excellent MR1 Mk2s have held this Award since 2017. These are truly musical speakers, delivering remarkably rich detail and fluid dynamics from such diminutive boxes.

There's plenty of space between instruments in the airy soundstage, which means that music takes on an expansive feel that makes most of the MR1 Mk2s' competition sound congested in comparison.

The dominant bassline in SBTRKT's *Wildfire* is taut and packs a punch. The MR1s have no trouble in rendering its deep, squelchy texture. They time well too; the magnificent pomp of David Bowie's *Magic Dance* blares through the Ruarks with terrific verve and sparkle.

Thanks to an expressive midrange, voices sound lovely. Bella Hardy's *The Driving Of The Deer* is delivered with the kind of effortless drive and insight we'd expect from decent hi-fi speakers.

There's a pleasing solidity underpinning the rich, warm midrange,

and the elegance with which her lilting, nimble vocals are delivered is simply gorgeous.

The MR1 Mk2s are lovely to listen to, but their retro looks are part of the charm too – though the rotary dial on the top adds a contemporary touch.

Another 21st century feature is the optical input that can support hi-res

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST DESKTOP
SPEAKERS**



These musical little boxes are a delight – and deserving winners

audio up to 24-bit/192kHz. It joins a 3.5mm aux input and a subwoofer-out at the back of the right speaker, which houses all amplification and connections.

These Mk2 Ruarks are delightful to use and listen to. In our view, no other powered speaker like this sounds better – the fourth Award is testament to that.

View offers: whf.cm/BestMusicSystems2020

MUSIC SYSTEMS

All-in-one set-ups offer space-saving convenience, but with this quality kit, there's no need to compromise on the sound

WHAT HI-FI?

 ★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST ALL-IN-ONE
SYSTEM OVER £1000**
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR


■ KEF LS50 Wireless II

£2249

The **LS50 Wireless IIs** are sequels to a product that we regarded highly enough to be our first *What Hi-Fi?* Hall of Fame entry. The LS50 Wirelesses are an active speaker system take on KEF's LS50s - wireless stereo speakers with built-in amplification and streaming smarts - and the Wireless IIs squeeze even more performance out of that familiar chassis and Uni-Q driver arrangement.

They do this through the introduction of an innovation called Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT), a clever way of absorbing sound waves radiating from the rear of the tweeter dome so they don't distort the unit's output.

This involves a round piece of plastic with a maze-like structure behind the tweeter. Each 'path' in this structure is 'tuned' to absorb a specific range of frequencies. KEF says that, together, the various paths absorb 99 per cent of unwanted sound.

A 100W class A/B amplifier powers the tweeter, while 280W is available to the mid/bass driver. The wireless connection has been upped to 24-bit/96kHz, though an ethernet cable increases that to 24-bit/192kHz. Support for DSD256 is also onboard, as is MQA decoding.

Streaming services, including Tidal, are directly accessible from the KEF Connect app - internet radio and UPnP servers, too. The LS50 Wireless IIs support AirPlay 2, Google Chromecast and Bluetooth, and are also Roon Ready.

New connections

KEF has ditched the USB Type-B connection, replacing it with an HDMI eARC socket to make it more TV-friendly. Alongside it are coaxial (24-bit/192kHz), optical (24-bit/96kHz) and 3.5mm aux inputs and a subwoofer output. The advancements KEF has made here are belied by the familiar aesthetic, but the

The Wireless IIs
take the all-in-one
system concept
to a new level

beautiful finishes and curved front panel make the IIs a real head-turner.

In our review of the LS50 Wirelesses, we noted a "clean and precise" manner and "neatly layered" soundstage. KEF has taken these attributes to another level. The effect of MAT is clearly heard in the cleanliness of the treble, although mids are cleaner-cut and bass more defined too, their extra refinement making the originals sound a touch crude.

The presentation has been opened out, that extra room not only filled with subtler, more precise detail, but also allowing for greater instrument separation that makes its delivery sound much less congested in comparison.

KEF's LS50 Wirelesses highlighted the appeal of an all-in-one stereo system as an alternative to a collection of relatively modest separates components, and the LS50 Wireless IIs simply improve on that concept. This is a sequel of rare quality.

■ Denon D-M41DAB £249

Denon has dominated the micro system category for as long as we can remember, and the D-M41DAB continues its unrivalled reign.

The D-M41DAB now comes equipped with Bluetooth and, following a significant drop in price last year, it is better value than ever. The USB input no longer features, but there are still analogue and digital optical inputs for playing music from external sources. It does, however, mean you won't be able to use a memory stick.

The whole character of this system was dramatically improved in the previous round of changes, giving a pleasingly forward presentation. It still sounds nicely even, but it really throws itself into rhythms with confidence. Dynamics, too, are particularly insightful and expressive.

The drop in sound quality from CD to Spotify stream has no effect on the D-M41DAB's sonic mastery. The

combination of low-end stability and dynamic sensibilities leaves us with a remarkably human performance for a hi-fi system at this price.

The D-M41DAB doesn't quite put its predecessor the D-M40DAB to shame, but it certainly puts it in the shade. It offers a character of performance that could hold its own against groups of separates costing much more.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST
MICRO SYSTEM**



The inclusion of
Bluetooth and a
great sound have
sealed this Award

You can always upgrade the D-M41DAB by replacing the supplied pair of speakers, but we don't think you'll feel the need - not least because you'd need to spend a fair bit more cash to get a markedly better sound.

The inclusion of Bluetooth is a major plus in this context, but it's the overall integrity of the Denon's sound that seals another Award in this category.

■ Marantz PM7000N £895

Practical yet entertaining, the Marantz PM7000N packs 60W-per-channel amplification, a DAC, network module and access to a host of music-streaming services into its chassis. All you need to do is add some speakers.

The PM7000N uses an Asahi-kasei AK4490EQ DAC, which allows for 24-bit/192kHz PCM streaming across the digital inputs (including a USB, coaxial and two optical) and music servers, and 5.6MHz DSD streaming across the USB input and music servers.

It also has four analogue inputs, including one phono, but there's plenty of source material within the Marantz itself. The PM7000N leverages the hi-res, multi-room HEOS platform created by Marantz and sister brand Denon, giving owners direct access to networked music servers, internet radio, and music-streaming services including Spotify, Tidal, Deezer and Amazon over wi-fi or ethernet.

There's AirPlay 2 for one-touch streaming from Apple devices, and the

offline convenience of Bluetooth. Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple's Siri are supported, too.

We play Rival Consoles' *Night Melody* and the PM7000N reveals a character that's powerful, expansive and weighty. It has the dynamic attention to convey the ebb and flow of the shuffling synths and we don't need to turn up the volume to be engaged by the sound. When lo-fi beats share the frame with sparkling

Marantz's just add
speakers system
is unbeatable at
under a grand

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
UNDER £1000**



synths, the quality at both ends of the frequency spectrum is noticeable, with the midrange keeping pace.

Some Marantz products we have reviewed have had a tendency for the sound to lack excitement, but there's more than enough on show here, and the handling of dynamics is a strength. As a just-add-speakers streaming system, the PM7000N is currently unbeatable for less than a grand.

■ Naim Uniti Atom £2399

Rarely does a product look and sound as good as the Uniti Atom, but here Naim has nailed the crossover between lifestyle product and premium hi-fi. The Uniti Atom is described as a streamer, but that is doing it something of a disservice. It's a system in its own right, to which you need to attach only a suitably talented pair of speakers.

It consists of 40W of class A/B amplification derived from the Nait integrated amps. Around the back are speaker terminals, ethernet and USB inputs, a single digital coaxial and a pair of digital optical sockets, and two analogue connections. For an extra £100, Naim will add an HDMI input so you can boost your TV's sound.

Google Chromecast, Spotify Connect, Tidal and internet radio are all on board, with further wireless enjoyment available via AirPlay and aptX HD Bluetooth. It's controlled via the remote control or equally logical Naim app.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
OVER £1000**

The Atom is an absolute treat to listen to, no matter what the source or material. Balanced, dynamic and expressively detailed, it combines just the right level of attack with an open and even-handed attention across the whole frequency range. It's like opening a door and listening to the music from inside the room instead of outside. There's a level of detailed expression here that rivals can easily miss.

The Uniti Atom is part lifestyle product and part premium hi-fi kit

Timing was a forte of the previous generation of Naim's all-in-one systems, so we're pleased to find none of it sacrificed this time around. The Naim is unfazed by the scale of a recording, the speed at which it travels, or with organising the instruments within it.

This is the kind of excellence we've come to expect from Naim, so it's no surprise that the Uniti Atom takes another Award again this year.

■ KEF LSX £999

KEF shrunk its first generation LS50 Wireless streaming system into a smaller, cheaper version, but retained the rare sonic qualities that made the original so special. The KEF LSX shares its sibling's blueprint as an all-in-one hi-fi system: a network streamer, Bluetooth receiver and amplification within a pair of compact stereo speakers.

Those speakers offer 200W of class D amplification and see the return of KEF's Uni-Q driver array, in which a 19mm tweeter sits in a 10cm magnesium/aluminium mid/bass cone. As yet, the Metamaterial technology used in the LS50 Wireless IIs isn't available here.

The LSX plays hi-res files all the way up to 24-bit/192kHz, though it will downsample to either 48kHz or 96kHz, depending on whether you pair the speakers to each other wirelessly or via ethernet. Over ethernet or 2.4GHz/5GHz wi-fi, users can stream networked music via DLNA or from Tidal - all from within the KEF Stream app. Spotify Connect, Roon compatibility, aptX Bluetooth and



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ALL-IN-ONE
SYSTEM UNDER £1000**

Apple AirPlay 2 are also supported. Optical and 3.5mm aux inputs mean you can connect TVs and portable devices, while a subwoofer output offers the chance to add more bass to the system.

We play Nick Cave's *Jubilee Street* and get the sense we're hearing something special. From the delivery of his first stanza, the LSXs are clearly descendants of the expressive and rhythmically astute original LS50 Wirelesses.

The LSXs are a scaled-down version of KEF's LS50 Wirelesses

The varied emphasis given to the guitar notes here is credit to the LSX's transparency with detail and its dynamic discretion. The placement of the crystal clear vocal is equally well considered. It also shares its sibling's relative talent for bass performance.

KEF here has produced a scaled-down, carefully crafted copycat of the excellent first LS50 Wirelesses, and it proves to be just as triumphant.

View offers: whf.cm/BestMultiroomSystems2020

MULTI-ROOM SYSTEMS

Enjoy your music in any room of the house with one of these great multi-room systems

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PREMIUM
MULTI-ROOM SYSTEM**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

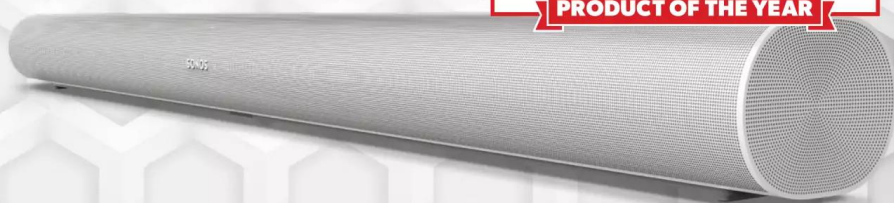


Image credit: Sonos

■ Sonos

For years, Sonos has been synonymous with the concept of multi-room audio, so it's almost hard to know which came first. At the very least, Sonos spotted a trend long before its competitors; at most, it's responsible for making the market what it is today.

The company continues to innovate, maintaining a presence in other sectors of the audio market with products such as the Amp and the Beam and Arc soundbars - all of which can be brought in to a multi-room system - as well as integrating Alexa Voice Control with products such as the Sonos One to

For its quality and user experience, Sonos is the best top-end choice

make it the finest all-round multi-room system available right now.

The Sonos app is a large part of the system's charm. It's where control of your system takes place and also offers the widest choice of streaming-service compatibility by some margin. There's no hi-res support, but Sonos does accommodate all the main file formats, including MP3, WMA, FLAC (up to 16-bit/44.1kHz), WAV, AAC and AIFF.

When it comes to performance, each member of the Sonos family offers the same entertaining character that makes the system so listenable. The One, for example, is one of the most impressive units in its class. It pairs Alexa voice

control with a full-bodied and spacious sound that's capable of going surprisingly loud for a speaker so small.

That general sonic character also carries over to the far larger Play:5, but it's able to produce a far bigger and bolder sound. This is a weighty performance that can easily fill a room without sacrificing the clarity or openness of the mid-range. It's effortlessly listenable, with no hard or sharp edges to cause distraction.

Great sound quality, the most substantial selection of streaming services and the most pleasant user experience once again make Sonos the best top-end multi-room option.

■ Audio Pro

Audio Pro has a strong line-up of multi-room speakers, plus a handful of Bluetooth products that can also be incorporated, but its Award-winning system comprises the Addon C3 speaker, its larger (and more sonically talented) sibling, the Addon C10 and the Link 1 - a hub that connects hi-fi components or wireless speakers into the chain.

The C3 and C10 create a pair of smart, boom-box-style speakers with a 'koala bear' driver configuration. The difference in cabinet size is reflected in the Addon C10's larger mid/bass driver - 13cm in diameter, compared with the Addon C3's 9cm. The C10 also has a larger reflex port and an 80W digital class D amplifier, so it can dig an extra 5Hz into those bass frequencies.

The puck-shaped Link 1's job is to collect song selections from the app, connect to your home network via either wi-fi or its ethernet input and

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST BUDGET
MULTI-ROOM SYSTEM**

dispense the music via the selected output. With a 3.5mm-to-RCA cable included, linking to an existing set up could hardly be easier.

The Audio Pro app seeks out products on the home network and allows access to Amazon's Alexa voice assistant. It's simple to use - drag-and-drop to partner speakers in stereo pairs or multi-room zones, and tweak bass and treble - but is limited compared with rival systems.

These speakers' musicality is unrivalled by anything at a similar price. The Addon C3's level of detail cleanly exposes the texture and timbre of each instrument and vocal line without underplaying cohesion or organisation in favour of analysis.



The C3 and C10 'koala' speakers form part of this multi-room set-up

Add the increased heft of the Addon C10 and the performance is able to twist our insides with its low-end authority. There's also more space to the presentation and greater ambient detail.

The Link 1 perhaps shoulders a lesser burden, but it performs its task with aplomb. It fits our Addon C3 like a glove, but even hooking it up to feed Spotify into our reference hi-fi system doesn't hold the performance back, despite the inherent limitations. For sound quality at the price, this system is unbeatable.

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ACCESSORIES

They might not be the most glamorous parts of your system, but these components can make all the difference to its sound quality

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SPEAKER CABLE
UNDER £15/M**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



■ AudioQuest Rocket 11 £12.50/m

AudioQuest seems to pick up Product of the Year Awards the way a darts player picks up 180; three top scores in a row. And those gongs are well deserved because the Rocket 11 is right on target.

What appeals to us is how flexible it is. It's easy to bend the cable around those tricky tight corners to reach your kit,

Flexibility, quality
and ease of use
combine to make
a top-grade cable

without worrying you'll break or damage the cabling. It uses semi-solid concentric conductors and long-grain copper to improve performance and reduce any interference that might degrade the quality of the sound.

Thoughtful touches such as marking the left and right cables, labelling which end goes into the amplifier and which end plugs into the speaker, and designing it so that you can use them in a singlewired or bi-wired configuration if

your system demands it, make the Rocket 11 all the more easy and appealing to use.

But the best thing this AudioQuest cable does is get out of the way and simply let you enjoy the music. Whatever song we play, our system sounds sparklingly clear, incredibly detailed and propelled by the kind of rhythm that keeps you toe-tapping all the way through an album. Leading edges are stunningly crisp and clean, and vocals are packed with nuance.

The Rocket 11 guides our reference system into performing with a pleasing and punchy sense of dynamism that's a joy to listen to. The Rocket 11 helps our system knit musical elements together with real confidence and alacrity, giving an impressive sense of space to boot.

It's a touch pricey (and costs begin to add up when you take into account how much you'll need), but if you're spending hard-earned cash on your hi-fi components, you'll want cabling that doesn't inhibit their performance.

The Rocket 11 speaker cable is an ideal way to let your hi-fi reach its full potential. Seen in that perspective, the not-insignificant cost turns out to be a small price to pay.

■ Vertere Acoustics Phono-1 Mk II £1000

Vertere Acoustics' Phono-1 MkII may not look anything special, but if you're after a phono stage at anywhere near the £1000 mark, it simply has to be heard.

That clean front with its solo power switch isn't the panel to focus on. The underside of the case is far more interesting. There are adjustments for gain - from 45.4 to 61.4dB in 12 steps - as well as a multitude of settings for capacitance and resistance.

Get these adjustments right (check your cartridge's technical specifications for the values required, but feel free to experiment) and we think you'll be able to optimise the Vertere's performance for most cartridges on the market.

Take a look at the back panel and it's all pretty straightforward. There's the input and output in standard stereo RCA form and a grounding terminal.

Unusually, there's also a Ground switch with three positions, to give the user options should hum be an issue.

There's no point in having a phono stage of this level if the rest of your system isn't suitably talented. We use our reference record player, the Technics SL-1000R with Vertere's MG-1 MkII/SG-1 MkII turntable/arm package, Burmester's 088/911 MkIII pre/power and ATC's SCM 50 speakers.

We play Nirvana's *Nevermind* and love the Vertere's drive and attack. It

Masses of sonic
detail organised
into a musically
cohesive whole

preserves so much of the recording's energy and delivers it with confidence. This disc shows off the Phono-1's surefooted timing and ability to render complex rhythms with composure.

This Vertere is a highly detailed performer, but its real strength is that all that information is organised into a musically cohesive whole. By the end of our listening sessions, we forget about analysing its performance and end up simply enjoying the music. And that, we believe, is the whole point.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PHONO STAGE
OVER £500**

Image credit: Vertere Acoustics

■ Rega Fono MM MK3 £199

Scoring a hat-trick is one thing, but clocking up four wins in a row is a rare feat indeed. But then the Rega Fono MM Mk3 is a rare breed; a virtually flawless phono stage.

The electronics are not complicated, but Rega has taken care to make well chosen adjustments to the Fono over the years to keep it at the top of its game. We start listening to Frightened Rabbit's *Painting Of A Panic Attack*, and get the feeling that our testing could well be

over before the closing bars of the opening track have played out.

The low noise-floor offers an extreme level of clarity and supplies an expansive dynamic range. Rega's confident yet delicate handling of timing and wide-open soundstage are clearly evident too.

Meanwhile, more energetic offerings are dealt with that similarly trademark Rega punch and enthusiasm, showing off a fine sense of rhythm and precision. Can anyone steal the Fono's crown?



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PHONO STAGE
UNDER £500**

■ Chord Rumour X £18/m

Chord once again strikes the right note in this category, its Rumour X retaining this Award for the way in which it helps produce a lively, cohesive sound from your system.

It uses XLPE (Cross-linked Polyethylene) as an alternative to the Teylon used in its high-end cables, alongside silver-plated high-purity copper conductors that are twisted to improve interference rejection. It's all covered in a white PVC outer jacket.

With it plumbed in, our system delivers a crisp, clean and dynamic presentation. We're impressed at the musically cohesive nature of the sound and the subtle dynamic shifts we hear.

There's plenty of punch and the ability to latch on to any rhythm track with unwavering precision too.

Whatever music we play, from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* to Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*, our system sounds right on song.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SPEAKER CABLE
OVER £15/M**

■ Chord Company C-line £40

Once again, Chord has seen off its rivals with the excellent C-Line interconnect. It's a no-brainer if you want to give your hi-fi system a sonic lift.

The cable features Chord's Tuned ARAY technology, which has been trickled down from products aimed at more high-end hi-fi. Add in high-grade copper conductors, high-density foil shielding, and you have a cable that is well equipped to make your hi-fi system shine that bit brighter and truer.

The C-Line's true forte is the way it allows us to hear the real musicality in a piece, allowing the components of a system to knit it all together.

It doesn't ignore things such as the size of the soundstage and the detail within, but places its main emphasis on the character of your music. You'll find a stronger rhythmic drive and more expressive dynamics with the C-Line connecting your hi-fi equipment than you will if you use bundled cables.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ANALOGUE
INTERCONNECT
UNDER £50**

■ Chord Company Clearway Analogue RCA £90/m

This cable offers further proof that Chord has a deep understanding of what makes hi-fi great. It's an interconnect that never loses sight of what matters: the musicality of your system.

Performance is truer when using the Clearway, as though everything has been cleaned. There's extra analytical insight and improvements in dynamics and organisation. The precision of the sound coming from our reference system with the Clearway plugged in is

significant. Timing is immaculate and there's more space to breathe.

Like its sister C-line cable (see above), the Clearway uses Chord's Tuned ARAY conductor geometry technology. Its conductors have a bespoke tri-core design that has an additional high-frequency shield inside the main foil wrap reducing noise interference.

For those with the budget and a revealing enough system, the Clearway will produce top-grade results.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST ANALOGUE
INTERCONNECT
OVER £50**

■ Atacama Evoque 60-40 SE2 £200 per shelf

Cynical or inexperienced hi-fi enthusiasts might contend that the support you use for your equipment is of secondary importance. These shelves will show them the error of their ways.

See those curved sides? They're not just an aesthetic detail - they help to reduce the build-up of internal standing waves, something reinforced by the shaping of the cut-outs on the underside.

To deal with vibrations, each leg is decoupled from the shelf it is attached

to, and has an internally mounted weight that controls resonance. They are terminated by rounded brass spikes for a degree of grounding between layers.

We're struck by how much more agile and dynamic our electronics sound when used on the Atacama. We're aware of more detail, coupled with greater separation between dense instrumental strands. Dynamic expression, precision and rhythmic coherence are better too. And we think that's worth paying for.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST EQUIPMENT
RACK**

Image credit: Atacama

■ Atacama Moseco 6 £120

The **Atacama Moseco 6s** have been our favourite budget speaker stands since we first reviewed them in 2014.

They're a classy pair of stands thanks to the neat, minimal design. The two metal columns - one filled for better stability, one for cable management - and the bamboo bases ensure a rigid build and sturdy support.

With a variety of speakers placed on top (from the ATC SMC 11s to the KEF Q350s), these Atacamas allow our

system to flourish by letting the speakers deliver their best in terms of punch, detail and rhythm. We're impressed with how weighty and dynamic these stands make our system sound.

There's texture to basslines, a twang to guitars, and expressive (if slightly forward) vocals. Overall, it's a very enjoyable performance.

For a relatively modest £120, these elegant stands will bring out the full potential of your stereo speakers.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SPEAKER
STANDS**

Image credit: Atacama

■ Goldring E3 £99

We've got so used to seeing the E3 occupy this slot that we're in danger of forgetting what a superbly realised moving-magnet cartridge it is. It will work well with the majority of affordable turntables, tracks securely at a typical 2.0g and is available in a fetching shade of violet.

This Goldring is an impressively rounded performer. It delivers the bombastic opening to Beethoven's *Ode To Joy* with all the control and power the

piece demands. It's an organised sound, one that can keep track of myriad instrumental strands without losing its way; but there's also plenty of dynamic punch and scale with music such as this.

The E3 also has a decent serving of attack and a surefooted way with rhythms. A high level of refinement keeps even aggressive recordings listenable and the sound it delivers is clear, informative and fun. It's the perfect complement to a mid-priced deck.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST CARTRIDGE
UNDER £150**

Image credit: Goldring

■ Ortofon Quintet Blue £349

One of a range of five models introduced in 2019, the Quintet Blue still, in our view, rules the roost in the world of affordable moving-coil cartridges.

We listen to Orff's *Carmina Burana* and the Ortofon responds with a clean and crisp presentation that brims with detail. The organised sound captures the bristling energy of the piece beautifully.

It handles the music's frantic dynamic swings with composure, refusing to harden-up even when provoked. We're

impressed by its refinement and ability to render treble textures too.

The Blue is a secure tracker at the recommended 2.3g. The presentation's even tonality and pleasing sense of life mean that we don't feel the need to play around with the tracking weight one bit.

We switch to Nirvana's *Nevermind* and the Ortofon responds with enthusiasm, punching out the basslines with glee. So much so that we can't imagine you won't be impressed if you buy one.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST CARTRIDGE
OVER £150**

PHILIPS

OLED+ 935

EISA
AWARD

**Best
Product**
2020-2021

HOME THEATRE TV

Philips 65OLED935



Breathtaking picture. Cinematic sound.

Give your movies the TV they deserve. This stunning Philips OLED+ TV boasts up-firing Bowers & Wilkins speakers, and the latest P5 picture processing with AI. You get a lifelike picture and thrilling sound with crystal-clear dialogue.

OLED+

The difference is real.

Sound by

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philips.com/oled+

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TELEVISIONS

2020 has been a remarkable year for TV, with some astonishing sets on the market

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 48-50IN TV
OVER £1000**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Image credit: Sony, Screen image Getty

■ Sony KD-48A9 £1799

This TV may well be the best sub-55in TV ever made. It's certainly the best you can buy right now.

Clearly looking to capitalise on the compact nature of the new, smaller OLED panel, Sony appears to have made the 48A9 as small as possible, at least in terms of height and width; while their panels are extremely thin, all OLED TVs need an enclosure for the speakers, processing hardware and connections.

Straight out of the box, the A9 is cautious in its delivery, seemingly reluctant to deliver the sort of dazzling contrast we've come to expect from great HDR signals. After a bit of tweaking, that issue is solved, and we're delighted to see images appear on the perfectly black screen with serious punch and purity.

The A9 handles motion really well. Sony has long been the master of motion processing and, while other manufacturers have made

improvements this year, the way the A9 smooths and sharpens motion without introducing fizz or artificiality is superb.

Sony's Master Series models are sold on their dedication to delivering the picture as intended, and the A9 delivers. There's a slight warmth and richness to the colours that may not be entirely true to life, but it is true to cinema. We're not talking about the sepia-tinted blandness you're confronted by when you select most TVs' Cinema mode: this is a subtle rosiness that enhances the sense of life in skin tones. Everything looks as it should, only better.

For sharpness and detail, there's never been a better TV at this size, and the way the set combines ultra-deep blacks and bright, pure whites works with these qualities to create an unrivalled sense of depth and solidity in the image.

And these comments stand pretty much across the board with 1080p

Small in stature
for an OLED TV,
perhaps, but this
Sony is a veritable
powerhouse set

Blu-rays and standard-definition broadcasts having an image that's both smooth and sharp, surprisingly detailed, and with vibrant, controlled colours.

The Sony A9 is a significant step-up on its closest rival for sound, too. It's punchy and dynamic, with openness and spaciousness, and a good sense of atmosphere. But while the A9 sounds good for a TV, particularly one this size, it can be pushed to hardness by high volumes. If you want audio quality that's equal to the picture, a dedicated sound system is still the way to go.

The quality of TVs below 55 inches in size has been limited for years, but LG has blown the doors off those limitations by making a 48in OLED panel available. Sony has taken LG's panel and, with its own picture processing and audio wizardry, raised the benchmark.

The best sub-55in TV you can buy? For sure; and a worthy Product of the Year.

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST 40-43IN TV

■ Samsung UE43TU7100 £379

Samsung is practically alone in making its core performance and feature set available at extremely low prices, as is typified by the new UE43TU7100, which is more or less the cheapest 4K model that the company currently makes.

Its quite elegant plastic feet give the set a fairly wide footprint of around 85cm and raise the set around 7cm – perfect space for a soundbar.

Connections amount to aerial, ethernet and USB sockets, an optical audio output and two HDMI inputs. Even at this end of the market, it's rare for a TV to have so few HDMI connections, but we suspect it's a limitation that will affect few buyers.

This is an LCD model with an edge LED backlight. It supports HDR10, HDR10+ and HLG but not Dolby Vision.

We are instantly impressed with the TU7100's picture. It's compromised, of course, as it has to be at this end of the market, but those compromises are in

the right places and the set delivers an enjoyable core performance.

This TV doesn't have the contrast range of a higher-end model, but blacks are surprisingly deep and there's plenty of overall punch. The Samsung provides lots of insight, digging up details that most sets at this price simply can't find. Crucially, this crispness and detail is delivered without any sense of artificiality or overenhancement; and the same is true of the way the TU7100 handles motion.

The TU7100 proves to be a capable upscaler from 1080p as well. The image is sharp, detailed and tonally balanced, and the set reduces picture noise without removing any intentional film grain. It does an admirable job with standard-def content, too. All told, this is an excellent picture performance for a TV of this size and at this low price. you'd have to spend a fair bit more to get a significant improvement.



Image credit: Screenimage Getty

A smaller set with big-screen features and performance. A fine compromise

It comes as little surprise that the TU7100's 20W sound system is no sonic masterpiece, and you'd be well advised to budget for a soundbar.

The TU7100 is about as affordable as TVs get and it does a remarkably good job in terms of core performance. And it boasts the best, most-app packed operating system in the business. As long as you can live with only two HDMI inputs, there's little reason not to buy.

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST 48-50IN TV UNDER £1000

■ Samsung UE50TU8500 £499

"What's the best TV I can buy for £500?" is one of the most common questions we get asked. It's a question to which there's a new answer: the best TV you can buy for £500 is the Samsung UE50TU8500.

The TU8500's edge LED backlight is admirably even, and produces deeper blacks than others in this category, combining them with clean, bright highlights. A QLED or OLED TV will have far greater contrast, but for an edge-lit LCD that costs as little as this, the TU8500 is impressive.

The set is sharp, detailed and a good handler of motion. The crispness and depth of the image are maintained, and the TV deploys a satisfying degree of smoothing without any artificiality.

The TU8500's colour balance does lean towards red, though. This can be mitigated somewhat by adjusting the Colour and Tint settings, but we never achieve a balance that seems truly correct. That said, the issue is only really highlighted when viewing the set next

to a more neutral competitor TV, so it's not a major flaw.

Switching to Full HD and you get a crisply defined and detailed image all round, proving that the TU8500 is an accomplished upscaler for the money. Colours are rewardingly vibrant, too.

The TV even does a decent job with broadcast, streamed and disc-based standard-def content. There's some inevitable softness to the image, but it's also clean, punchy and controlled.

The TU8500 even sounds decent by prevailing standards. Opt for the Amplify mode and there's a decent degree of punch and dynamism to proceedings. Dialogue is projected well throughout *Blade Runner 2049*, but with everyday TV you may want to switch to the Standard sound mode – a bit cleaner, more direct and focused.

There's nothing really wrong with the sound and that's more than half the battle when dealing with TV speaker systems. A simple soundbar will still prove a serious sonic upgrade, though.



Image credit: Samsung, Screenimage Getty

At a tenner an inch this is a no-brainer buy if you're after a 50in television

It's great to be able to test flagship TVs, but it's at least as thrilling when we discover a real bargain of a set, and that's just what the Samsung UE50TU8500 proves to be.

For just £500, you get an accomplished all-round picture performance, surprisingly solid sound, and an operating system that's both great to use and packed with streaming apps. That's seriously good value.

■ Samsung UE55TU8000

£549

The only serious bugbear about this TV is the stand. The Samsung TU8000 sits on a pair of unhelpfully wide plastic feet and you'll need a unit that's at least 103cm wide to support it. A more central leg positioning option would be handy.

Otherwise, this is classic Samsung. It's a near bezel-less TV, neatly finished on the rear with a fairly uniform 6cm thickness and no awkward lumps sticking out to hinder wall-mounting.

The picture is involving, exciting and way beyond anything else you'll find at this price. To have top levels of shading and punch in the same TV is beyond the capability of most mid-range TVs - and it's the kind of performance you'd pay a lot more for with QLED and OLED tech.

There's also a depth of black on the Samsung that rivals can't quite match - it's hard to fault the blackness of space in *Interstellar*. It's rich and almost pure without a hint of light bleed from the LED backlighting. The few colours in

this monochromatic section pop beautifully. Whether it's the orange trim of the spacesuits, the red bags in the shuttles or just the skin tones, the palette is rich and balanced.

Taking a step down to HD, it's clear this TV upscales well. There's still plenty of intensity to the colours, if not quite the same subtlety as we see at 4K.

Details are occasionally a little soft, but don't be tempted to use the image sharpener too much otherwise noise is quick to creep in. All the same, we're pleased by what we see here and even SD footage of daytime TV is watchable.

It has to be said that last year's Samsung LED TVs were not as gifted for sound as they were for picture performance and it's the same balance again here. Even a budget soundbar will offer a big improvement.

There isn't much of a leading edge to the sound. The dialogue is fairly murky, too. There's no problem hearing or

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 55-58IN TV
UNDER £1000**



Image credit: Screen image Getty

Widely spaced
feet or not, this
TV represents
astonishing value

understanding what's said, but it's like listening with a layer of material between our ears and the voices. In contrast to the excellent picture, then, the sound of this TV is underwhelming.

The picture, on the other hand, outperforms everything else we've seen in its class, and many above it too.

All of which means that the excellent, affordable TU8000 is a truly worthy Best Buy winner at this price.

■ Philips 55OLED805

£1499

This is a Philips OLED as it should be: genuinely excellent. If you're prepared to forego the odd next-gen feature, it may even be the best performance-per-pound 55in OLED you can currently buy.

Once we've set things up just as we like them on this set, the resulting 4K picture is stunningly sharp, detailed and three-dimensional, and brilliantly balanced in terms of colours and contrast. It skews a little darker than the LG CX, but its picture is beautifully deep and dramatic and there's no loss in terms of dark detail.

The Philips has a clear advantage over most rivals when it comes to definition and detail resolution. The image is crisp and solid to a degree that makes other sets look a bit flat by comparison. What's most impressive is that this detail and definition doesn't look forced or overly enhanced - the crispness doesn't come at the expense of naturalism.

Dropping down to the *True Grit* Blu-ray, the Vivid mode is horribly overblown. It's essentially trying to make

the Full HD SDR disc look like 4K HDR, but it's instead producing an unnaturally garish and noisy image with blown-out white highlights.

But make the right adjustments and the endpoint is a lovely picture. Sharpness and detail remain two of the set's greatest strengths, but its colour balance is also delightfully well judged.

Last year's OLED804 was highly regarded in terms of sound, but that hasn't put Philips off making adjustments for this 2020 model. The midrange drivers and tweeters on the bottom of the set are of new designs and are housed in a larger enclosure, and while the rear-firing woofer looks the same, it features two extra passive radiators for improved bass response.

While you wouldn't need to spend much on a soundbar to get even better sound, by TV standards, the Philips sounds very good. Playing the second chapter of the *Blade Runner 2049* 4K Blu-ray, the OLED805 delivers actual bass frequencies.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 55-58IN TV
OVER £1000**



Image credit: Philips. Screen image Getty

A terrific value set:
OLED, Ambilight
and, for a TV, very
decent sound

This set provides stunningly crisp and detailed pictures from all sources. It delivers far more accomplished audio than most rivals, adds awesome Ambilight to the mix, and has a lower price tag than its LG, Sony, Panasonic and Samsung equivalents.

Gamers may be put off by its lack of next-gen HDMI features, but for everyone else, the 55OLED805 represents an excellent purchase.

■ Sony KD-65XH9005 £1299

This is a great TV. The Sony XH90 TVs don't have the same 'Flush Surface' bezel-less design of the more premium XH95 series LCDs, but there's still little frame to worry about. It's no work of art, as the top Sonys often are, but it's a perfectly good-looking TV.

The base black levels on this TV are excellent for an LCD panel. From there, Sony offers huge scope to choose your preferred trade-off between shadow detail and black depth. Processing technology often gets in the way, but it's remarkably well judged here, and we'd recommend spending some time setting up. Even if you'd rather have it all on auto, though, it's an excellent picture.

The *Deadpool* freeway fight scene is a tour de force of HDR handling. This largely monochrome scene of mixed lighting is rendered with superb balance. When the moments of colour do arrive, this TV is more than ready. *Deadpool's* suit is the obvious colour highlight of

the sequence. The Live Colour setting gives it some real zing while keeping a natural texture and hue to the fabric.

No matter the content, the colours from this Sony are just as vivid and enjoyable as at 4K. Dropping down to standard-def, many sets can look rather electric for tone when watching live daytime TV, but this Sony calms things down while supplying a perfectly well-scaled image.

The X-Balanced Speakers are designed to create a good compromise between the better sound of rounded drivers and the thin space provided to house them. Combined with the tweeters, they make for some excellent dynamics. However, despite all the positive qualities the sonic presentation lacks weight.

Ultimately, at this end of the market we find that TV's tend to prioritise either weight and scale, or outright clarity. The Sony goes for the latter, and that's a fine decision for everyday TV. It's less

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 65IN TV
UNDER £2000**



Image credit: Sony Screen Image Getty

A massive screen
for a bargain price.
Just pair with a
sound system

satisfying on movie night, though, and you're well advised to budget for a dedicated sound system if a cinematic experience is what you're after.

Whether you're a next-gen gamer or not, you'll want to put this TV high on your wishlist. The sound may be a little limited but the picture is a dream; colours are intense, contrast is killer and the inky deep blacks go way beyond LCD expectations. A Best Buy all the way...

■ Philips 65OLED805 £2199

Philips has long had an ace up its sleeve in the form of Ambilight, which is so much more than the flashy gimmick it may first appear to be. The company knows that Ambilight alone, though brilliant, won't be enough to convince everyone to buy its OLED over one of its many rivals, so it's also pushing the envelope in the two most crucial areas; performance and price.

In short, not only does the Philips look and sound better than rivals, it costs less, too. Ambilight, in the end, is just a lovely sweetener.

Philips is less forward-thinking with its HDMI's, though, of which the OLED805 has four. While HDMI 2.1 is far from widespread, many manufacturers are adding HDMI 2.1 specs and features to their TVs, while Philips isn't, so the OLED805 doesn't support eARC or other more advanced features mainly of concern to new-gen console gamers.

With the all-important picture performance, though, results are extraordinary. The OLED805's sharpness

and detail are its greatest strengths. Everything is rendered with a crispness and solidity that few rivals can match.

The Philips' colour reproduction is excellent, too. *1917's* palette is muted but not lifeless, and the OLED805 happily finds the sweet spot, ensuring that the green fields are verdant without being vivid, and that faces are flushed without being artificially rosy.

Philips has made some changes to its motion processing this year, introducing new Pure Cinema and Movie modes. Both are decent, but Philips still has work to do here. But the motion handling is only a blemish in what is otherwise a superb picture performance. We give the OLED805 an almost unfairly stern upscaling test with the first series of *Red Dwarf* from Netflix, and it responds with a good overall image.

And Philips hasn't cut corners with the sound, either. Compared with rivals, the OLED805 is more dynamic, punchy and weighty. Still, with a TV of this size, we'd go for an external sound solution.

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 65IN TV
OVER £2000**



This Philips looks
and sounds better
than its rivals –
and has Ambilight

The 65OLED805 is a superb TV. Not only does it look and sound better than its rivals, it's cheaper and adds Ambilight to the equation.

Some rivals handle motion better and the lack of next-gen HDMI features will give gamers pause for thought, but these slight flaws are drops in the ocean when you consider the set's overall performance-per-pound offering. This is a great TV, and a worthy Award winner.

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ AWARDS 2020

■ Samsung QE75Q950TS £4799

BEST 8K TV

This is the first 8K TV we've tested that not only isn't a downgrade on its 4K siblings but actually makes a case for upgrading to an 8K TV even for 4K content. According to Samsung, non-8K content should look better on this 8K TV than it does on an equivalent 4K model. That might sound obvious, but it's no easy feat: the TV is having to invent a hefty chunk of the picture it produces.

Although the 8K content available from the YouTube app is far from earth-shattering, the picture is still stunning, with an aerial shot of Tokyo one of the highlights with sharply defined skyscrapers and intricate detail.

The image feels 'real' to a degree that trumps even 4K, with a level of solidity and three-dimensionality that makes you want to reach out and touch it. It's this added realism and solidity that makes 8K so appealing.

The most important thing for the foreseeable future is how an 8K TV such

as the Q950TS handles 4K content and, as we fire up the 4K Blu-ray of *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2*, it quickly becomes clear that it fares exceptionally well. We're blown away by how crisply defined the image is. We can't recall a sharper 4K picture, with nothing looking artificially enhanced or exaggerated – it simply pops from the screen more than we've previously seen.

The set has strengths that are unrelated to resolution, too, such as its deep, insightful blacks and motion processing that, while still not quite best in class, is significantly improved on that of last year's models. Its colour balance is lovely, too.

The Q950TS boasts a 70W version of the OTS+ speaker system we first heard in the 4K Q95T. This involves eight speakers – four mid-range drivers, two woofers and two tweeters – arranged around the edges of the TV. The result is an open and spacious sound.



Image credit: Samsung. Screen image Getty

An 8K screen must make up most of a 4K picture; this set does so brilliantly

If you're determined that your next TV will be an 8K model, the Samsung QE75Q950TS is the one to get. It's better than a 4K model when it comes to 4K content, and delivers perhaps the most detailed, sharpest images we've seen.

We still can't wholeheartedly recommend going for 8K right now, but if you have the budget and an appetite for a degree of future-proofing, this is the best case yet for taking the plunge.

8K TV – EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

We've seen 8K televisions in the shops now for a couple of years and more, but it's still a new format, with limited applications. Here are some facts and figures...



Image credit: Screen image Getty

What is 8K?

8K refers to resolution – the number of horizontal and vertical pixels in an image. Pixels equals information, so more pixels should, in theory, make for a better quality image. 8K, has a horizontal resolution of 7680 pixels and a vertical resolution of 4320 pixels. 4K has half the number of horizontal and vertical lines (3840 x 2160) and Full HD is 1920 x 1080. So 8K has four times as many pixels as 4K and 16 times more than Full HD.

Who is making 8K content?

Filmmakers use cameras with sensors that range from 4K to 8K, though films will be finished at either 2K or 4K. The Japanese Broadcasting Corporation, NHK, ran a series of 8K trials in 2015 and in 2016 announced it had successfully demoed a broadcast in 8K. The Korean Broadcasting Corporation (KBS) is researching 8K broadcasts as well, working with LG on content, possible broadcasts and displays. Streaming site Vimeo is one of the first to offer 8K HDR support and there is 8K content on YouTube.

What about 8K TVs?

LG and Samsung revealed 8K prototypes at CES 2015, while Sharp went a step further with an 85in 8K TV on sale in Japan that year. LG ignored that and claimed the title of the world's first production 8K TV in 2016, with Sharp returning the favour a year later by saying its LC-70X500 TV was the first consumer-ready 8K effort. LG volleyed back at the start of 2018 with the announcement of an 88in OLED 8K TV, that was not just the largest OLED screen ever made, but the first in 8K. Now, though, in 2020 we're getting used to seeing 8K sets – the Samsung above is the first 8K TV to win a *What Hi-Fi?* Award.

When will we be watching 8K?

If you're in the UK, Europe or US, it's unlikely you'll be viewing proper broadcast 8K content any time soon, and we don't think an 8K TV should affect your buying decisions at the moment. And, of course, content needs to be created, and the infrastructure for distribution realised, so, for now, broadcast 8K is not a guarantee; but never say never...

View offers: whf.cm/BestSpeakerPackages2020

SPEAKER PACKAGES

Make movie night special with one of these superb surround-sound speaker packages



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
£1500-£2000
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Dali Oberon 5 5.1 £1699

The Dali Oberon 5 5.1 surround-sound speaker package is certainly a special product. It nicely plugs the gap between the £1500 and £2000 price brackets, comfortably beating every rival around it for clarity, detail and expression.

It comprises the three-time Award-winning Oberon 5 floorstanding speakers as right and left channels, sandwiching an Oberon Vokal centre, and a pair of Oberon 1 standmounters delivering surround effects. Providing the low end is a 170W Sub E9-F.

The Oberon 5s have a fairly large and lightweight 29mm soft-dome tweeter, which can dip into lower frequencies to help integrate with the two 13cm mid/bass drivers, made from Dali's wood fibre/fine grain paper pulp cone material.

It's a similar story for the Oberon 1 surround speakers, though there's just one mid/bass driver here. Dali has made them as versatile as possible by adding a

wall-mounting attachment. The Vokal has the same drivers, with the tweeter in the middle of two mid/bass drivers and the front-facing bass port underneath.

In the sub, there's a 23cm aluminium-coned woofer inside an MDF enclosure, which sits 3cm off the floor, thanks to some rubber legs, creating enough space for a downward-firing bass vent to work its magic. It has a heavy magnet motor system with a four-layered, long-stroke voice coil designed to keep the cone up to speed with the amp's signal.

Admirable performers

We fire up the projector and play *Deadpool* on 4K Blu-ray. The film's opening scene puts home cinema sound through its paces. It's chaotic, with explosions, dialogue, cars zooming left and right, and plenty of thumps and hits as henchmen meet their grisly ends. The Dali Oberons perform the job admirably.

The Oberon 5 5.1 package beats its rivals for detail and expression

There's a beautiful rasping quality as a motorcycle zips across the soundstage in a wonderfully integrated fashion. Like the rest of the action, the sound doesn't pass from speaker to speaker, but rather moves through the space around us.

There's surprising authority and power to this relatively diminutive speaker package. Airborne vehicles slam into the road with terrifying weight, and every punch sounds as though it has been delivered with super-human strength. But details of the twisting metal and splattering blood aren't steamrollered by the thuds.

The dynamics and detail from the centre speaker give a fabulous sense of the roughness of Wade Wilson's voice.

Lean, attractive and unfussy: these are words equally apt for the aesthetic and acoustics of these clever performers. This is how home cinema should be, which is why it's our Product of the Year.

■ Wharfedale DX-2 £399

If you're short on space and on a budget, yet want to get closer to the surround-sound cinema experience than a soundbar can take you, the Wharfedale DX-2 package could be the solution.

The DX-2 is a tiny, charming and extremely capable 5.1 surround-sound speaker package. Standing 19cm tall, the four satellite speakers are small enough to fit almost anywhere.

We usually recommend placing speakers on dedicated supports, but in the real world that isn't always possible, so these are designed to feel at home on shelves, bookcases or anywhere you can find a spare spot in your room. You can wall-mount them too.

Speakers this size often struggle to handle Hans Zimmer's epic score for *Inception*, but the DX-2 package delivers a respectable scale of sound – larger and heftier than its stature would suggest. It



Image credit: Wharfedale

sounds punchy, weighty and surprisingly expansive.

It may be designed for smaller rooms, but the DX-2 copes admirably even in our large AV test room. There's plenty of detail and no small amount of skill when handling dynamic shifts.

The speakers are well integrated too. Surround effects ping around the room, engulfing you in an articulate cocoon of sound. The haunting whispers on the island in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* are

The Wharfedale DX-2 is a tiny, charming and capable package

clear, precise and chilling.

The edges of notes are precise and dialogue cuts through the special effects, although we'd prefer more texture and depth to voices. Rey's hopeful pleas contrast with Luke's grumbles, but more low-frequency detail would flesh out the emotion.

For greater articulacy and heft, you'll have to move up a band to the Award-winning Q Acoustics' 3010i 5.1. But at this price, the DX-2 remains peerless.

■ Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack £895

This home cinema package comprises four speakers that received five-star reviews – that alone would suggest the Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack is at least halfway to a five-star judgment. Its centre-speaker-and-sub elements have enough to carry it the rest of the way; and so it repeats its Award-winning successes of the past two years.

The heart of this Cinema Pack is two pairs of 3010i standmounts, to which we gave five stars last year. They are backed up by the 3090i centre speaker and 3060S subwoofer combination.

We play *Baby Driver* and are treated to a convincing and entertaining surround-sound presentation. You get a strong sense of this package's hi-fi roots, its effortless musicality breezing through the enjoyably eclectic soundtrack. From the drumbeats of Kashmere Stage Band's *Kashmere* to the jazzy piano in Carla



Thomas's *B-A-B-Y*, the performance is urgent and detailed.

There's scale and spaciousness aplenty too, as well as tight integration between the speakers. Placed around our AV testing room, they manage to deliver a gapless, coherent soundfield.

As the smallest speaker in the 3000i range, the 3010i can bring only so much bass – which is where the subwoofer comes in. We play *Alien: Covenant* and the sub brings definite low-end presence

The Cinema Pack features four speakers with five-star reviews

to the presentation, providing atmospheric rumble and devastating bass during thunder and explosions.

During the opening dialogue between Guy Pearce and Michael Fassbender, the centre speaker takes the opportunity to reveal its facility for detail and tonal synchronicity. Pearce's voice is clearly projected with a rich tone.

If you can supply convincing detail, scale and subtlety at this price, you're on to a winner. Q Acoustics definitely can.

■ Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack £1099

Take Q Acoustics' 3010i 5.1 package and swap in a pair of the company's 3050i floorstanders to replace the front channel units, and you have a two-time Award-winner - and former *What Hi-Fi?* Product of the Year.

Unique to the 3050i is in the range is Q Acoustics' use of HPE (Helmholtz Pressure Equalizer) technology. This is, essentially, a tube inside the cabinet, filled with damping material to absorb unwanted energy and reduce resonance.

We'd defy anybody not to enjoy an evening with this speaker package. The exuberance is infectious, without being fatiguing, and it is complemented by a great deal of maturity and insight too.

The power and bass weight offered by the 3050i cater for greater intensity, without foregoing the snappy timing of their more diminutive partners. That

fluidity is one of the most impressive aspects of this package - it avoids rigidity and instead gives a fast, natural-sounding performance. Paired with the 3050i, the centre speaker performs wonderfully, seeming even more dynamic and engaging than when partnered with the 3010i fronts.

The sub's output is augmented by the 3050i taking on part responsibility for bass power, which means plenty of extra low-end detail. Insight generally is better too, especially with soundtracks, where the 3050i pick out extra strands and organise them with precision. Their musicality doesn't go unnoticed either, with subtle and large-scale dynamics delivered with deft understanding.

All of which leaves us with the task of handing this excellent package an Award in this category one more time.



■ Monitor Audio Silver 200 AV12 £2865

This talented Silver 200 AV12 package wins a gong for a fourth time. We have previously praised the Silver 200's speed, expression and sense of fun as a stereo pair, and none of that has been lost as a part of an AV package. But we mustn't pass over their three equally talented protagonists - the Silver C150 centre speaker, Silver FX surround speakers and Silver W-12 subwoofer.

The whole Silver range was designed to be as compact and position-flexible as possible, but the 200s thrive most when placed around 50cm from our back wall.

The 25mm gold-dome tweeter on this sixth-generation Silver range has been fine-tuned for clearer, smoother and distortion-free high frequencies. The larger drivers use technology from the company's flagship Platinum II Series aimed at lowering distortion.

This set needs time to excel but, after around 100 hours of running in, the crashes, bangs and wallops of *The Lego Batman Movie* are thrown at us with incredible cohesion, as if physically travelling around the room.

As a whole, the package times with precision, and the centre speaker offers subtle inflections in deadpan vocal deliveries, urgency in moments of panic and musicality in the soundtrack. The whole thing is enthusiastic, expressive and expansive. Even through an AV amp, there is that same musical quality we've heard from the 200s via the CD.

So, it's a fourth consecutive Award for this package - and we remain just as impressed as we have been for the past three years with this package's ability to excel with stereo music as much as it does with surround sound from films.



View offers: whf.cm/BestHomeCinemaAmplifiers2020

HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

Big-screen thrills only really thrill when there's big sound too. And these three are masters of that art

WHAT HI*FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER £750-£1500**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Denon AVC-X3700H £999

As we lifted the new 8K-ready Denon AVC-X3700H home cinema amplifier from its box, we're sure we detected a small part of us that would have delighted in the Japanese company messing this one up – purely so we would have something different to write about one of its products. Unfortunately for that mean-spirited part of us, the sonic improvement over last year's excellent, Product of the Year model is marked.

The new HDMI section is perhaps most important in terms of future-proofing; one of the AVC-X3700H's seven inputs and two of its three outputs are full HDMI 2.1 sockets with support for 8K@60Hz and 4K@120Hz. All of its HDMI connections support HDR10+, Dynamic HDR and Quick Media Switching alongside last season's suite of HDR10, HLG and Dolby Vision.

Gamers are also well served, with Variable Refresh Rate added to reduce

frame tearing and improve overall precision, while Auto Low Latency Mode and Quick Frame Transport are there too.

In terms of audio, the AVC-X3700H has 11 channels of processing. There are nine power amplifier channels built-in, each feeding a claimed 180W of power per channel. That means you can have a 5.2.4 or 7.2.2 Dolby Atmos configuration.

Everybody will be able to make use of this amp's 3D audio support – whether or not you have dedicated height speakers – which runs to Dolby Atmos, Dolby Atmos Virtualization Technology, DTS:X, DTS Virtual:X and IMAX Enhanced. That built-in moving-magnet phono stage is still a feature this year too.

The energy of the performance is immediately striking. There's greater muscle than before, but it is also even more lithe and better defined. It's a combination of solid dynamic expression, which enthuses each vocal

Denon has taken a fine product and made it into an even better one

line as much as differentiating one gunshot from another, a sharper punch and greater clarity that allows you to become more immersed in the content.

The scale and authority is mightily impressive, yet Denon has still managed to get the basics right. There is plenty to feed our two subwoofers, but the sound is well balanced, open at both ends, and smooth throughout its frequency range. It remains engaging at low volumes, too.

Most of our testing is done with the amp's Pure Direct mode, which gives us the cleanest, clearest performance, although you can engage some of the height virtualisation software and not lose too much in the way of focus.

So, on the one hand we've written the same review about yet another Denon home cinema amplifier. On the other, however, we've been able to spend a few days with the best unit of its type with a three-figure price tag we've ever heard.

■ Sony STR-DN1080 £429

There's no stopping the Sony STR-DN1080; this is the fourth year in a row that it has received one of our Awards.

It takes only a couple of minutes of listening and we're grinning. This amp sounds as fantastic as ever, reaching deep into its reserves to deliver a performance packed with punch, dynamism and authority unheard of at this price.

There's an incredible amount of detail, from natural, expressive voices to layers of insight and depth surrounding each sound effect. Dynamically, it's a fun and exciting listen. Quiet moments are as captivating as huge explosions going off in every corner of the big, open soundfield – and the DN1080 handles the changing shifts with ease and masterful control.

Surround effects swirl around convincingly, and you can track exactly where each noise – whether it's a spell, a crash, a gunshot or a magical creature – is placed in the soundfield. It envelops

you in a cocoon of sound, and that's before you engage the Dolby Atmos or DTS:X 3D soundtracks.

There's so much low-end depth and texture. The Sony pulls each bass note taut and makes an impact.

It also has a rhythmic quality that lends itself well to music. The Sony handles dynamic shifts and vocals in a fluid, articulate manner that sounds more musical than most amps. High

A deft handling of surround effects is just one of this unit's many talents

notes are reached with plenty of headroom. The sound is clear and crisp, but that vein of solidity running through the amp keeps it from sounding bright.

The STR-DN1080 has all you need from a seven-channel amp – including Dolby Atmos compatibility and the skill to add 'phantom' surround back channels for those who don't have the speakers. Few products carry the label of enduring all-rounder as well as this.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER UNDER £750**

■ Denon AVC-X6700H £2299

Despite the protestations of those who take them, a gap year rarely results in any kind of self-improvement. That's where the Denon AVC-X6700H differs: it has been away for a year and come back more interesting than it was before.

The 6000 lineage was one of those Denon decided not to upgrade in 2019, waiting until this year to double down on those usually annual improvements.

The release of these new models is rooted more in the adoption of new technologies than any attempt to dramatically improve an already class-leading audio performance. The headline is the new HDMI section, with one of the AVC-X6700H's eight inputs and two of its three outputs being HDMI 2.1-certified and therefore enabling full support for 8K. All inputs also support HDR10+ as well as HDR10, HLG and Dolby Vision.

As well as its 11 channels of power amplification (at a claimed 205W per channel), the AVC-X6700H affords 13 channels of DTS:X decoding. It shores up

an audio arsenal that already supported most 3D formats, including Dolby Atmos, Atmos Height Virtualization, DTS:X, DTS Virtual:X, IMAX Enhanced and Auro-3D.

In terms of music playback, Denon has kept Bluetooth and Apple AirPlay 2 connectivity, and the company's HEOS eco-system allows multi-room use.

This is certainly a more powerful presentation than two years ago, and this Denon wields that power with great verve and precision. The balance is more bass-heavy than before too, and some might want to dial a little of that out

New-tech has helped Denon cement its position at the top here

from time to time, but any extra weight works to deliver full and realistic voices as much as booming intensity.

But most impressive is how Denon has been able to make this a more expressive and engaging amplifier. While the power and punch will grab your attention, it is the detail and dynamic expression that will lock it in for hours at a time.

This is a step forward rather than any great leap for Denon's 6000-series amp, but it does cement the company's position at the top of the class for home cinema amps at this price.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER OVER £1500**

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SOUNDBARS & SOUNDBASES

Rapid technological advances combine with a crowded marketplace to create sky-high standards in this sector

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST SOUNDBAR
£750-£1500

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

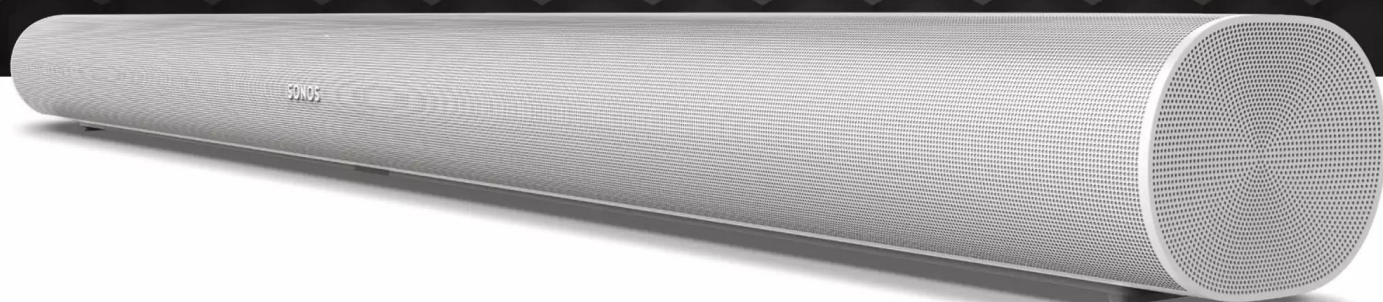


Image credit: Sonos

■ Sonos Arc £799

There's a lot riding on the Sonos Arc soundbar. This is the company's first foray into Dolby Atmos, long after most other companies have released products that support the format. It also has to justify costing almost twice as much as the brilliant Beam.

The Arc is designed to partner bigger TVs. At 114cm, it is a bit wider than a typical modern 49in TV and so best partnered with a 55in model. The curvy design helps mask the Arc's dimensions and makes it look svelte, but its 8.5cm height is not inconsiderable. It does, though, have an integrated IR repeater so signals sent from your remote to your television are not blocked.

At the back of the Arc are the power socket, an ethernet connection for wired networking, and a single HDMI port. An optical adapter is included for those with older TVs, but the intention is that you use HDMI and the ARC (Audio Return Channel) functionality to get the sound from your TV to the Arc. In fact, the Arc supports eARC (Enhanced Audio Return Channel), so it can handle Dolby Atmos signals from TVs that can output it. That said, Atmos can be carried using either the Dolby Digital+ format or the higher quality Dolby True HD. Of course, to get True HD Dolby Atmos, your TV needs to not only support eARC but also have

pass-through functionality. In short, the newer your TV, the better its Atmos support is likely to be.

The Arc's Dolby Atmos soundfield is generated by 11 Class D digital amplifiers that power 11 custom drivers - eight elliptical woofers and three silk-domed tweeters, two of which fire diagonally into the room. Other Sonos speakers - as well as the Sub - can be used as dedicated surrounds too.

The Arc will run exclusively on the new Sonos S2 platform, although it's easy to play music through it without touching the Sonos app at all. It will appear as a playback device in the Spotify and Tidal phone apps, and has AirPlay 2. It can also be controlled via Alexa and Google Assistant.

Convincing delivery

All of that effort has paid off: the Arc delivers one of the most convincing Atmos presentations of any soundbar we've heard. Play the bombing-run scene from *Unbroken* and we're immediately transported to within the fuselage of the B-24 Liberator. Our listening room is filled with wind noise and the whirr of the plane's engines, and the incidental creaks and rattles are placed in specific spots, including right in the top corners of the wall we're sitting against.

Rarely does a device arrive that does so much and does it all so well

The Arc is dynamically deft too; big dynamic shifts are handled with aplomb, the first fly-by of the Japanese fighter plane and the machine gun fire from the Liberator rocking the room, even at less than a quarter of the Arc's volume.

We switch to *Blade Runner 2049* and bullets streak across the room, while low, distant rumbles of thunder and the building music are suitably menacing.

This is a supremely well judged bass performance. There are vast quantities of deep, weighty and tuneful bass - but the lower frequencies never overwhelm and, even at its loudest and deepest, the Arc remains remarkably composed. Treble is clear and sparkly too but never too bright.

That tonal evenness helps make the Arc a much more musical performer than most soundbars too, although stereo music isn't projected forward towards the listening position as much as you'd expect, given that movie soundtracks are delivered with such three-dimensionality.

That slight lack of directness to music is our only criticism of the Arc. It's a stunning performer. It delivers one of the most immersive Dolby Atmos experiences we've heard from a soundbar and acts as a wireless speaker with access to practically every music-streaming service. Rarely does a device arrive that does so much and does it all so well.

■ Yamaha YAS-207 £295

It's testament to just how good the YAS-207 is that, despite the intense competition in the budget soundbar market, this speaker-and-sub combo is an Award winner for the fourth year on the trot.

Its secret weapon is YSP (Yamaha Sound Projection), a technology designed to simulate a surround-sound experience from a soundbar, thereby offering a reasonable compromise between performance and practicality for those who don't have the space, cash or desire to adorn their living room with multiple speakers.

While others use similar – and more recent – technology in their soundbars, Yamaha's still works well. Effective though YSP is, though, it's no miracle worker. It doesn't make soundtracks appear as if they're being blasted down from your ceiling or from behind your sofa. But as far as 'virtual' surround-sound experiences from a single

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST SOUNDBAR
UNDER £300**



soundbar go, the YAS-207 is hugely effective, defying the bar's physical proportions. And you can always play with the seven sound modes offered through the Yamaha HT Controller app.

The bar is only 6cm high, so most TV screens will easily clear it, and it's inconspicuous in its design too. It's a black bar with a few indicative lights to

Effective sound
distribution, neat
looks and a sub –
all for under £300

show source and surround-type selection. They can be turned off via the basic-but-easy-to-use remote control.

The external subwoofer is a lot less inconspicuous, of course, but it's fairly slim, and can be tucked out of the way.

The YAS-207 is a natural entertainer, and its modest price only adds to its overall appeal. It's an enduring winner.

■ Sonos Beam £359

It might have had its limelight stolen by the dazzling Arc (see left), but the Beam remains an impressive – and affordable – soundbar in its own right.

At the time of its release, in 2018, the Beam upped the ante for Sonos's rivals, including features such as an HDMI connection, ethernet port and voice-control assistants Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant and Apple's Siri.

Touch controls on the top allow you to change the volume, play/pause and mute the microphone, while an LED indicates status and voice feedback.

Available in black or white finishes, the Beam looks stylish but understated. Inside it there are four full-range drivers, one tweeter and three passive radiators, plus five class-D amplifiers. The drivers and radiators are positioned along the front and the far edges of the bar.

The Beam is a typical Sonos product, which is high praise indeed. Crucially, it means that this isn't simply a soundbar:

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
**BEST SOUNDBAR
£300-£750**



it's also a wireless, multi-room speaker that can play music from almost any source, including Spotify, Tidal, Apple Music, Amazon, Google Play and Deezer, your phone, hard drives and so on.

The Beam can talk to any other Sonos products you have and, thanks to AirPlay 2, it can also link with products from other manufacturers. This compatibility means you can add Sonos speakers to form a full surround-sound system.

Sound quality really is exceptionally good for something this size. Given the Beam's dimensions, the width and spaciousness of the soundstage are astonishing. Play the opening of *Ghost In*

The soundstage
and surround
effects confound
expectations

The Shell and the sound effects of the gunfight fill the room in a way that confounds expectations, firing left and right and echoing much further into the room than we would expect.

There's good height and weight to the delivery, too. A helicopter seems to arrive from above your head, and when the soundtrack becomes bass-heavy, the Beam reproduces it with authority.

Dialogue is clear and direct, and never drowned out by the rest of the action. There's a touch of brightness to the treble but, for a speaker of this size and price, that's eminently forgivable. This remains a superb, affordable soundbar.

■ Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar £2199

Do a bit of homework on the Ambeo and you might well end up asking a question: "When there are so many good Dolby Atmos soundbars out there, why should I buy one that's more expensive, much bigger and a fair bit fussier?" Our answer? Because it's also much better. In fact, it's the best-sounding soundbar we've ever tested.

It's much bigger than most products of its type, but that's because Sennheiser has opted for much larger drivers, capable of covering a far greater portion of the frequency range, negating the need for an external subwoofer. This is a genuine one-box home cinema solution.

That driver array consists of six 10cm woofers and five 25mm tweeters arranged across the front and sides, plus two upward-firing 9cm full-range drivers.

Around the back of the Ambeo you'll find four HDMI sockets, three of which are standard inputs, with one supporting

eARC (Enhanced Audio Return Channel). This means it can send and receive sound signals - including Dolby Atmos - from the TV via the one cable.

Alongside the HDMI is an Ethernet socket, USB for updates, an optical input and stereo RCA aux-in, while Bluetooth and Chromecast make your streaming options almost endless. There's a sub pre-out, too, should you feel the need to add a dedicated bass unit.

We're not ones for pre-judging, but we have to admit that we didn't expect the

Once you've heard the Ambeo, its price and size won't matter

Ambeo Soundbar to be nearly as good as it is. A rich, natural sound bounds from this unit, with dynamic shifts both large and small well within its grasp.

Most important is how well it delivers those surround effects. Its presentation stretches into the room, up to the ceiling and almost around the listening position.

Yes, the Ambeo Soundbar is bulky and, yes, it's far from cheap. But the sound quality and processing on offer here are good enough to make those concerns fade into insignificance.



WHAT HI*FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST SOUNDBAR
OVER £1500**

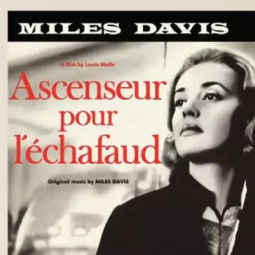
THE BEST FILM SCORES TO TEST YOUR SYSTEM

You'll know if your home cinema set-up isn't doing justice to these five incredible film scores



Blade Runner Vangelis

Few scores are so entwined with their film as Vangelis's accompaniment for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. Largely improvised and recorded while the composer was watching the film, the music's warmth is somewhat at odds with the narrative, yet takes in its sweeping landscapes and darkly romantic ambience with every sustained note.



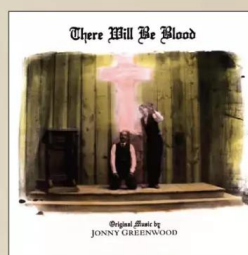
Ascenseur Pour L'échafaud Miles Davis

There's something decidedly eerie yet darkly romantic about Miles Davis's muted trumpet lines laced throughout this 1950s French crime story. The score walks alone beneath heavy air, moving skittishly when tempos increase but always echoing the solitude of its dusky cinematic bedfellow.



La Planète Sauvage Alain Goraguer

Alain Goraguer was at a creative peak when scored this 1970s animation, in which giant blue Draags enslave human-like Oms on their planet Ygam. A long-time collaborator and composer with Serge Gainsbourg, Goraguer's break beats and psychedelic instrumentation are perfect backdrop for this surreal allegory.



There Will Be Blood Jonny Greenwood

From Jonny Greenwood's dissonant string compositions, you'd be forgiven for thinking *There Will Be Blood* was a horror film. His score casts a heavy shadow across the open Californian plains, injecting the kind of dread that allows Paul Thomas Anderson to explore this tale of a man possessed by wealth with great subtlety.



Taxi Driver Bernard Herrmann

We could have chosen any of Bernard Herrmann's scores for Alfred Hitchcock, but few are as sonically dense as this, his last work, for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Horn sections echo New York's traffic, while brushed kits and plucked bass put rhythm to its underbelly. Few lines are as beautiful as the saxophone in the theme.

View offers: whf.cm/BestSetTopBoxes2020

SET-TOP BOXES

With hundreds of channels and box sets at your fingertips, set-top boxes have transformed the TV experience



■ Sky Q £199

Sky Q is the standard set-top box for new Sky subscribers, but there's nothing standard about the experience. However, to get the most out of Sky Q, you will have to fork out for the pleasure.

For starters, you should choose the 2TB box as this brings access to 4K Ultra HD content and allows you to go

It's a fifth Award in a row for Sky Q, the ultimate set-top box

multi-room with the addition of Sky Q Mini boxes. You will also need to factor in paying for the content you want to watch. There are all sorts of bundles on offer, led by the flagship Sky Sports and Sky Cinema packages, but now also bolstered by the inclusion of Netflix and Spotify. All of this costs a significant amount of money.

There's no denying that it's expensive, but Sky Q is also the best TV service available in the UK by a long way. The

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST SUBSCRIPTION BOX

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

breadth and depth of content remains Sky's strongest selling point, but the interface and 'fluid viewing' experience, as Sky calls it, is almost as important.

Keeping up with streaming

The regularly updated interface is fast, good-looking, intuitive and gets you to the content you want quickly. Sky's curated content is improving too, offering up personalised programmes and films based on your viewing habits in an effort to keep pace with the experience offered by streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

The amount of 4K content has vastly improved since launch and some of that content now comes with Dolby Atmos sound, too. HDR has also been available since this year and has improved those sharp, detailed pictures even more.

Sky Q remains the ultimate set-top box and the portal to a TV service fit for the 21st century. So, for the fifth year running, it walks away with a Product of the Year Award in this category.

■ Humax FVP-5000T £189

At its core, the Humax FVP-5000T offers FreeviewHD+ television. That means subscription-free access to live broadcasts of all Freeview channels - including BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and their various subsidiaries.

There's a decent selection of channels broadcast in Full HD - though how many depends on your location. Programme recording, including the 'series record' function, is achieved via an eight-day television guide. Multiple tuners mean you can record four programmes while you watch a fifth, which should be enough for most TV addicts.

Netflix is on-board for those with a subscription, and even has its own button on the remote control. The box also features built-in wi-fi and an ethernet port, a couple of USB 2.0 inputs plus an RCA output.

The FVP-5000T provides a good quality image. Colours are natural, and there's a satisfying amount of detail across all Full HD channels. Watch in standard definition and those characteristics remain, despite the expected drop in quality.

Humax's box is a great Full HD upgrade for an older television

WHAT HI·FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST PVR



We have few complaints when it comes to sound quality, with the Humax giving a peppy, relatively insightful and enjoyable performance. If you need a Full HD box to give your older TV more sparkle, there's a reason Humax has now won four Awards in a row.

View offers: whf.cm/BestProjectors2020

PROJECTORS

If you want the biggest image for your home cinema set-up, forget the telly and choose a 4K projector instead



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST PROJECTOR
UNDER £2000**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Epson EH-TW7100 £1599

In a world of laser and ultra-short-throw technologies, Epson has kept faith in its traditional 3LCD projectors. The EH-TW7100 may not be native 4K, and its bulb will need replacing after four years, but sticking with tradition has its advantages - including a reasonable price.

The EH-TW7100 has Bluetooth for audio-out to a soundbar or wireless speakers, but there are sufficient HDMI and powered USB ports to handle a media streamer on top of whatever sources you might attach. It also runs at 3000 lumens - bright enough to get a decent picture even with some light.

The EH-TW7100 is easy to live with, thanks to its compact size and adjustable lens that can project a 100in image from between 2.95m and 4.77m. It can be ceiling, rear rack or desktop mounted.

The EH-TW7100 isn't native 4K resolution; it works on the basis of a trio of 1080p LCD chips and employs pixel

shifting to give the UHD effect. Given that native 4K projectors start at more than double the price, this represents a reasonable compromise. Regardless of the resolution, it's HDR-enabled, supporting HDR10 and HLG.

The Epson EH-TW7100 gives an excellent picture right out of the box. The opening wide shots of the Missouri countryside in *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* are expertly balanced for a projector at this price. The scene is bright, the colours natural and the clouds carefully shaded. While it's not as sharp as a true 4K picture, nor the blacks as deep as those of similarly priced TVs, there's a nuance to the tone and texture of the actors' faces that's hard to beat.

We move to 1080p with *The Imitation Game* on Blu-ray, and the picture is still sharp. The close-ups during Alan Turing's Bletchley interview are detailed and unaffected by noise or blur. The

The EH-TW7100 isn't true 4K, but it is a reasonable compromise

colours and black depth are just as good as at 4K, and these sequences offer an excellent opportunity to show off this projector's skills with dark detail.

Even at standard definition, watching *Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers* on DVD, the big picture from this projector stands up well. The colour saturation needs a bit of a kick but, once adjusted, this epic adventure comes to life.

The Epson EH-TW7100 stretches the limit of what can be considered a budget big screen device, but it more than justifies its price. It produces a picture that's in line with the character, if not the class, of what you'll get at the cinema.

That performance, combined with its luminance, connectivity, flexibility and the available accessories, all add up to a superb family projector that will make an excellent addition to almost any home. You won't find better in this class, which is why it takes home the top prize.

■ Epson EH-TW9400

£2549

Solid, vibrant and with plenty of picture pop, the Epson EH-TW9400 stands on the cusp of that next big step up in price to native 4K projection. It features Epson's 3LCD technology, with three separate liquid crystal chips (one for each of the three primary colours). The single 3000-hour lamp means you can watch one film a day, and still expect it to last around seven years.

Around the back, there are plenty of connections for your sources, including a USB 2.0, two HDMI 2.0s and ethernet, so you can connect set-top boxes, streamers and hard drives as well as Blu-ray players. It supports HDR10 and HLG formats plus active 3D processing.

It is astonishing how much brightness this projector can produce. At a claimed 2600 lumens, it's streets ahead of the competition, bright enough to watch films even in moderately lit conditions.

Detail levels are solid, with hairs and wrinkles superbly rendered with fine textures bringing the image to life. It's similar with dark details, too, with night scenes still showing plenty of differentiation in the image.

Its ability to shade lends the picture a fantastic sense of depth that sets the Epson apart from the competition. There's also a subtlety to colours that's beyond anything our previous Award winner, the Optoma UHD65, can muster.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST PROJECTOR
£2000-£3000

The Epson has a fine picture, but without the 4K price tag

Even as you drop down through different qualities of source material, colours and depth are still beautifully strong and the image still pops. If you're looking for a great projector without the price tag of a native 4K unit, you may just have found it.

■ Sony VPL-VW270ES

£4990

It may be expensive, but the Sony VPL-VW270ES is a 'true' 4K projector, using 4K-resolution chips rather than 'faux-4K' technology. Take it for a spin, and you'll find it is stunning value.

It has a 4K SXRD panel projection system, with native 4K (4096 x 2160) resolution and support for HDR10 and HLG. The picture's stark crispness is the first sign of the Sony's superiority over more affordable faux-4K rivals.

We play *Life Of Pi* on 4K Blu-ray and the VPL-VW270ES offers the kind of sharpness we haven't witnessed on our projector screen since its predecessor. Improvements have been made to the panel's reflective silicon layer for better

reproduction of shadows and blacks. Sony has evolved its 'Motionflow' mode for smoother motion performance, too.

In high-contrast scenes, detail emerges from darkness, with nothing lost to shadows or sacrificed for black depth. The contrast level is similar to that of a decent LCD TV. We play *Star Wars* on Blu-ray and the solid yellow hues of text against a black backdrop are strong. That penchant for richness is evident in the sparse desert locations and gleaming light sabers.

Much to our delight, it offers a hugely watchable performance with standard DVDs, with admirable clarity and colour punch. Some noise creeps in to remind



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST PROJECTOR
£3000-£5000

The 'true 4K' Sony projector delivers a home cinema experience

us of the format, but, given the upscaling task, the Sony handles it well.

You can get '4K' projectors for less, but none does the resolution quite like the Sony VPL-VW270ES. It promises a scintillating home cinema experience, and delivers just that.

■ JVC DLA-N5

£6495

You don't have to be in financial super-yacht territory to get a taste of JVC's native 4K projectors. The JVC DLA-N5 has 4K resolution a claimed 40,000:1 contrast ratio and fully motorised all-glass zoom lens.

Its 17-element, glass lens produces an image between 60in to 200in with a 100in picture possible from a distance of 3.16m to 6.45m. With 1800 lumens brightness, the DLA-N5 is a lights-off projector. You can expect around 4500 hours of use from the bulb. There's HDR support (HDR10 and HLG) but HDR10+ and Dolby Vision are off the menu.

The DLA-N5 gives an exceptionally good performance. Colour production is

impressive and effortlessly nuanced, with skin tones natural and expertly blended. *Thor: Ragnarok* in 4K HDR is simply stunning on our big screen. The contrast handling of the DLA-N5 turns the dingy skirmish in Surtur's underground lair into a rare treat. When the craggy caverns are flooded with the fire giant's near-black minions, none of the fight action is lost to the shadows.

Even at Full HD, colours are still a sight to behold. The N5 has no problems scaling the detail into a 4K picture, but it doesn't upscale standard-def content to full screen size. Any content below 1920 x 1080 will be scaled by four times the native resolution of the source.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

BEST PROJECTOR
OVER £5000

Even at this price, this JVC projector feels like good value for money

The JVC DLA-N5 certainly costs a fair amount, but it still sits short of where the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Even at this price, it feels like there's value to be had with a large-scale picture that's so strong in HDR and colour care, and it's a worthy recipient of this Award.

Winning Performance

Much more than just 'entry-level' cables, the award-winning Chord Company C-series and Clearway products feature our latest shielding and unique ARAY technology, first introduced on our flagship products and now benefitting all ranges.

Proudly designed and hand-built in England since 1985 by a dedicated team of music lovers.

Power, speaker and HDMI cables are also available.

Ask your nearest Chord Company retailer for a demonstration. Find out more: www.chord.co.uk



WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2020

**BEST ANALOGUE
INTERCONNECT UNDER £50**
Chord Company C-line

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2020

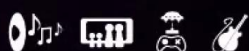
**BEST SPEAKER CABLE
OVER £15/M**
Chord Company RumourX

WHAT HI-FI?

AWARDS 2020

**BEST ANALOGUE
INTERCONNECT OVER £50**
Chord Company Clearway
Analogue RCA

CHORDTM
COMPANY



View offers: whf.cm/BestBlurayPlayers2020

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

If you've stuck by your Blu-ray disc collection, you'll be well rewarded by these great players



■ Panasonic DP-UB820EB £290

The **Panasonic DP-UB820EB** borrows much of its picture-processing tech from the company's flagship 4K machine, the DP-UB9000, but at under half the price.

For connections, there's ethernet for a wired internet connection, two USB inputs, and twin HDMI outputs for those owners who prefer to split the picture and sound for their display and amp. There's also a set of 7.1-channel analogue outputs for added flexibility.

Lots of flagship tech, but at under half the price of the range-topper

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 4K BLU-RAY
PLAYER OVER £250**

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

The DP-UB820 handles the full range of surround-sound codecs on 4K Blu-ray and streaming services, including Dolby Atmos and DTS:X. It also covers all the bases for HDR, with HDR10, HDR 10+ and Dolby Vision support.

All the key catch-up and on-demand video-streaming services are here, including BBC iPlayer, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video - ideal if you're plugging straight into a projector. We fire up the player with *Blue Planet II* in 4K and HDR10, and head to the Galapagos Islands, where we're greeted with a detailed volcanic landscape.

The picture proves to be as vibrant and immersive above sea level as it is below. As marine iguanas nibble away at vegetation on the sea floor, the Panasonic picks up an impressive level of detail on their skin, claws and faces.

They convene on a sun-kissed cliff top, where the DP-UB820 paints an eye-catching and immersive picture. There's a burst of colour as a crab feeds on dead skin from the iguana's back. The oranges, reds and bluey-whites appear punchy, contrasting with their hosts' darker skin.

We switch to *Aquaman* in Dolby Vision and the Panasonic raises the bar even higher. As pirates board the Russian submarine, the headlights and red landing-lights on the underwater vehicle punch through the murky depths.

The DP-UB820 is a decent upscaler too. There's plenty of noise and the colour balance has a warmish tint - but the Panasonic does a good job of working the original *Transformers* movie on Blu-ray into something watchable.

The Panasonic complements its exciting picture with sound to match. It delivers a weighty and powerful performance that's more muscular and grown up than many budget players, with rich dialogue irrespective of whether a scene is quiet or characters are caught up in an avalanche of surround effects. The DP-UB820 is a dedicated 4K player that delivers on multiple fronts.

■ Sony UBP-X700 £199

Until the **Sony UBP-X700**, we hadn't encountered a budget 4K Blu-ray player capable of delivering a five-star performance, but this year it picks up its third Award in a row. It boasts virtually identical features to the pricier and former Award-winning UBP-X800 - the main difference being the X700's support for Dolby Vision HDR.

The UBP-X700 also supports 4K 60p pictures and can play SACDs and 3D Blu-rays. The Sony supports 4K HDR streams on Netflix and Amazon Prime, with BBC iPlayer, BBC Sport, Demand 5, Spotify, Rakuten TV, YouTube and many more smart apps also included.

On the connections side, there are ethernet, coaxial digital, USB and twin HDMI outputs - handy if you want to separate the video and audio feeds in your home cinema set-up.

Despite not flashing the hi-res audio badge, the UBP-X700 can also play up to 24-bit/192kHz files in all popular files, including WAV, FLAC and DSD.

We've always lauded Sony for its natural-looking disc players, but with its wonderfully subtle and stable picture, the UBP-X700 takes things to a new level. It balances the colourful elements of *Thor: Ragnarok* with the more realistic hues of Earth. The movie is a kaleidoscope of vivid colours and the Sony juggles them all with a deft hand.

Sony's UBP-X700 takes Blu-ray picture quality to a new level

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

**BEST 4K BLU-RAY
PLAYER UNDER £250**



It's a fun, involving performance with stacks of detail. In terms of audio, dialogue is front and centre, and wonderfully clear. Special effects are flung about with agility and precision and there's a good amount of attack and punch when fists and hammers smack into humans and Hulks alike. It's an engaging and immersive presentation.

Overall, the X700 is a fantastic Blu-ray player that makes watching 4K discs an affordable reality and thoroughly deserves a third Award in a row.

INNOVATION

KEF's loudspeakers have taken a leap forward in sound quality this year – and that's down to an innovative plastic puck

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

INNOVATION AWARD

WINNER



Image credit: Kef

Metamaterial Absorption Technology by KEF

Every year we scour the hi-fi and AV industry for an innovation that marks the biggest leap forward in performance. This year we are somewhat surprised to find that our winner comes from the loudspeaker category.

Of course, that's not to denigrate the sector in any way. It's packed with as much engineering excellence as any other field in hi-fi or AV in general. But loudspeaker manufacturers tend to use mature, well-established technologies, where advancements tend to come from improved materials or manufacturing methods rather than fundamental changes in how things are done.

So when a speaker company comes up with a fresh and clever solution to an established engineering problem, we sit up and take notice. Most rivals have settled on what they feel is an acceptable compromise because no better solution is available. We're glad KEF has proved them wrong with its Metamaterial Absorption Technology.

A conventional tweeter dome fires as much sound backwards as it does forwards towards the listener. In most drive units, this rearward sound fires into a small chamber that's often stuffed with sound absorbing material. The problem is that not all of this unwanted sound is absorbed, and some of it bounces around the chamber. This causes resonances and, perhaps more damagingly, can come back through the dome to distort the forward sound.

Circular maze

Metamaterial Absorption Technology is KEF's way of dealing with that rearward sound. Here, rather than feeding into a damped small chamber, it feeds into something about the size of a ice-hockey puck that looks curiously like a plastic circular maze. This component is layered and made up of 30 tubes, each tuned to absorb a different frequency.

KEF claims that once combined, the tubes absorb a wide range of frequencies

This small plastic puck has seen a big improvement in KEF's sound

– from around 600Hz upwards – much more effectively than alternate methods. The result is cleaner, less distorted highs.

We've heard the technology implemented in two of KEF's newest products, the LS50 Meta stereo speakers and the LS50 Wireless MkII, and we were stunned by the scale of these sonic gains. We had the older, non-meta versions of these products to hand, and the difference in performance is profound.

In both cases, we found the sound was subtler, more detailed and easier to listen to. There was a reduced level of clutter to both the treble and midrange regions, and a far higher level of clarity overall. Yet, tonally, little had changed in the balance and character. Both were still very much KEF products.

KEF's engineers make it clear that we're at the beginning of metamaterial development in speakers, so expect this technology to be part of its technical DNA for years to come. We can't wait to see and hear what it becomes.

READERS' AWARD

We asked you, our readers, to vote for the product that stands out above all – and this is the one you chose

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

READERS' AWARD

WINNER



Image: Wharfedale

■ Wharfedale Linton £1000

Listen to hi-fi kit from yesteryear and you might notice an audio presentation more suited to the music from that era. In the case of the original Wharfedale Linton speakers, that was between 1965 and the late 1970s – a time of big trousers, big music and big speakers.

We don't know what it says about our readers, but when asked to vote for one favourite hi-fi product, you chose the new version of the Lintons, launched to celebrate Wharfedale's 80th anniversary.

These are new speakers built using modern methods and materials, but with an old-school approach to styling and sound. At just over 56cm tall and 30cm wide, the Lintons are larger than most modern standmounters. However, due to their natural look with matched wood veneers, they won't dominate a room.

The Lintons are fitted with two rear-firing bass ports on each speaker and, rather unusually, they are designed specifically for use with the grilles on. Not only does this help to maintain that low visual profile, the grilles actually

improve the sound thanks to their shape ameliorating interference from reflections from the edges of the cabinet.

We pair them with the energetic Rega Elex-R integrated amplifier (£949) and get a brilliant sense of scale and space. We play John Williams's *The Raiders March* – the main theme from the *Indiana Jones* films – and get a thrilling sense of these speakers' dynamics.

Big hitters

Played through the Lintons, the piece offers a brilliant range of texture and ability as it builds. The trumpets sound just as heroic as the archeological adventurer, while the string section launches in front. Underneath it all, the enormous hits on the kettle drums are reproduced with consummate ease by these big standmounters.

It's such an open presentation that our listening space feels bigger than it is. Every instrument is there to be heard in the soundstage. The harp strums float over the top, the timpani chimes in

We asked for our readers' views... thankfully, we're in full agreement

perfectly, the cymbal clashes and the tubular bells ring so true that we can almost picture the instruments. It's quite joyous and, arguably, a demonstration of these speakers at their very best.

We play something more recent with *Blinded By The Lights* by The Streets and its bare, thumping bass. Through the Lintons, it's big, clean and as precise as we expect – just the bass, the snare and Mike Skinner telling the tale of a club night gone wrong. It's not as forward a sound as we're used to from modern speakers, but the Lintons do something they cannot: we get a magnificent sense of the size and the feel of the club, right down to the strobe lights and dry ice.

The Lintons do an impressive job of capturing something of an older, fuller, more easy and open style of hi-fi sound without forgetting to make the music exciting. That excitement may not come thundering out of its cones, but you don't need whisky and elbow patches to enjoy it either. We have to hand it to you, readers, you made an excellent choice.

TEMPTATION AWARD

High-end hi-fi kit with huge price tags to match, this is the product we'd choose if money were no object

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

TEMPTATION AWARD

WINNER



Image credit: Vertere Acoustics, Andy Cahill - Photoworks

■ Vertere Acoustics MG-1 MkII/Mystic £9300

The mastermind behind Vertere Acoustics is Touraj Moghaddam, founder of Roksan and designer of the innovative and rather brilliant Xerxes and TMS turntables; so it comes as no surprise to find that the MG-1 MkII package is a fully polished product.

There are similarities between those classic designs and the MG-1, but this deck and the partnering SG-1 MkII tonearm are products of fresh thinking. There are so many interesting details, from a motor body that's free to rotate, so that belt tension remains constant, to a removable centre spindle on the platter that stops noise from the bearing being transmitted to the record surface.

The platter doesn't use a conventional mat either; Vertere has bonded a thin 3mm layer of acrylic to the aluminium alloy platter to make contact with the record. The power supply unit that drives the motor is housed in a separate, outboard box. This controls the playing speed too, and changing from 33⅓ to 45rpm needs just a flick of a switch.

The SG-1 Mk II tonearm is just as interesting. Its bearing is a variant of a unipivot design where the arm balances on a single point, but Vertere has gone its own way by sitting the point between three precision ball bearings rather than a flat pad. The newest member of this package is Vertere's in-house cartridge, the Mystic. This 9.1g moving coil is the most conventional design of the trio, but the cartridge tracks well at the recommended 2.0g and is easy to fit thanks to threaded bolt holes in its body.

A kind of magic

The initials MG stand for Magic Groove, which sounds a bit over the top until you start listening. It doesn't take long to realise that Vertere has delivered something special for the money.

We start by listening to Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and are blown away by the dynamic expression on offer. The music is packed with energy and drive and there's just so much information on offer, with the deck able to uncover

The MG-1 MkII package is an exceptional performer

every little detail. We can't recall a similarly priced alternative that sounds as precise or as articulate.

The package's stereo imaging is excellent. It's expansive and impressively focused. Instruments stay firmly locked in position no matter how complex the music gets, and it's all done with a confidence that's hard to better.

Those looking for that stereotypical soft and warm vinyl sound would do better elsewhere. This Vertere package sounds open and transparent, forgoing any sign of excess richness for a hard-hitting presentation that sounds unusually natural to us. It's a neutral and highly analytical performer that's honest to the recording, warts and all.

The MG-1 MkII package is an exceptional performer even at its elevated price level. It is fuss-free to use and is obviously built to a high standard. Most of all it renders sound with a combination of precision, agility and dynamic dexterity that we haven't heard bettered by any rival near this price.

HALL OF FAME

WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

HALL OF FAME

WINNER



There have also been a few pairs of headphones. We chose the Sennheiser HD600s from 1998, a pair of premium headphones that set a serious standard long before 'head-fi' went mainstream. And, in a similar vein, the Bose QuietComfort 15s, our choice from the 2009 Awards, set the benchmark for active noise-cancelling earphones.

In many ways, this year's winner, the Sony WH-1000XM4 headphones, combine the best features of those previous Hall of Fame entrants. The latest entry in Sony's unrivalled range, the XM4s deliver a surprisingly large step up in performance over their predecessors, despite the Award-winning XM3s also being given a five-star review.

Premium design, comfort and sound, plus class-leading wireless and noise-cancelling performance, make them the ultimate choice when it comes to over-ear, on-the-move listening.

The XM4s deliver a sturdier, sleeker design than previous models. They're slimmer and lighter in the right places, while the earcups are softer and larger. These design upgrades combine to produce a comfortable fit.

The headline feature for the WH-1000XM4s is the introduction of a brand new sound processor. Sony has switched

from DSEE HX to a new DSEE Extreme engine. The new engine not only attempts to upscale compressed music to almost hi-res quality, it also adds artificial intelligence technology called Edge-AI. It's been developed with the help of Sony Music Studios Tokyo to analyse music in real-time, with the aim of reproducing a more accurate sound that's faithful to the original track.

Elsewhere, Speak to Chat means the headphones recognise that you are talking and will stop playback and switch to their Ambient Sound mode automatically, while Wearing Detection pauses playback when you remove the headphones, then starts playing again when you put them back on.

Most crucially, Sony has somehow managed to squeeze out even more performance from the WH-1000XM4s. The soundfield appears wider, they're more composed and confident, and there's power, punch and a sense of poise that really helps the XM4s raise the bar.

The premium wireless noise-cancelling headphones category is arguably the most competitive category around in 2020 - and Sony continues to stay on top of the pile with the WH-1000XM4s. They are a deserving addition to our Hall of Fame.

■ Sony WH-1000XM4

Each year, we select one product that has not only won in its category but, in our opinion, will make a lasting impact on the market for years to come - and we then add that product to the *What Hi-Fi?* Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame features products from more than 40 years of our history, with past winners including the B&W 606 speakers, the Naim Mu-so wireless speaker, the Yamaha YSP-1 soundbar and the Pioneer Kuro plasma TV.

Sony has set new standards with its WH-1000XM4s headphones

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

■ Julian Richer



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

WINNER

You may not know the name, but you will be aware of many of Julian Richer's outstanding contributions, which stretch far wider than the hi-fi industry.

Richer is best known for founding electricals chain Richer Sounds, which he began in 1978, aged 19, with the opening of the first store in London Bridge. There are now 52 stores across the UK with more than 500 employees, and Richer Sounds has almost become shorthand for an electronics retailer.

The chain has won plenty of awards in the retail world over the years and we've always been happy to recommend them as somewhere you can expect good service. But don't just take our word for it - in 2011, Richer Sounds was awarded a Royal Warrant of Appointment to HRH The Prince of Wales as a supplier of consumer electronics products.

Despite not being one for publicity, Julian Richer has made the headlines in recent years for how the business has been run. Richer Sounds is part of the Living Wage Scheme, with Richer backing their Living Hours programme and working to curb zero-hour contracts. The company also donates 15 per cent of its profits to charity.

Most notably, Richer recently handed control of the business to his staff, transferring 60 per cent of his shares into a trust for his employees. Staff also received a thank-you payout for their service, receiving £1000 for every year they had worked for the retailer. "I feel an incredible loyalty to my hard working colleagues and they should receive any benefit from running the business once my time is up," said Richer.

The company has been happy to broaden its wings, too, with projects such as Richer Unsigned; a not-for-profit organisation that supports and promotes undiscovered artists and musicians. After all, the hi-fi industry is nothing without the music.

Richer Sounds champions the consumer electronics industry in much the same way we do, helping people to make the most of the music and movies they love by encouraging them to experience them in the highest quality possible. And it attempts to do things the right way, making a positive mark on the world as it goes about its business. We think that makes Julian Richer a worthy winner of our Outstanding Contribution Award in 2020.

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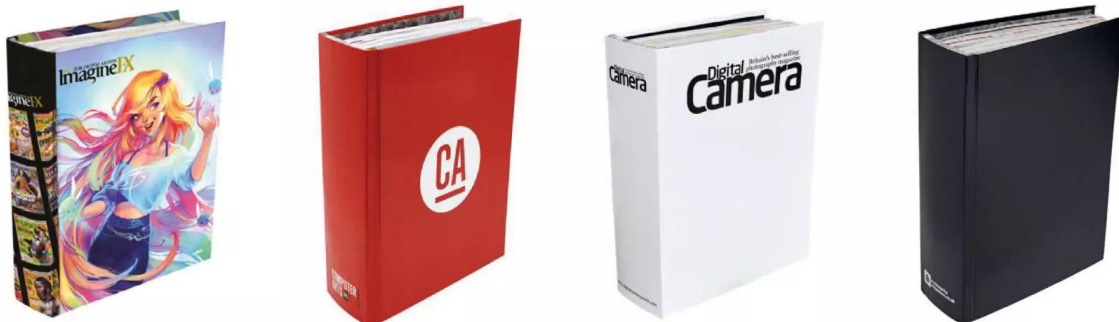
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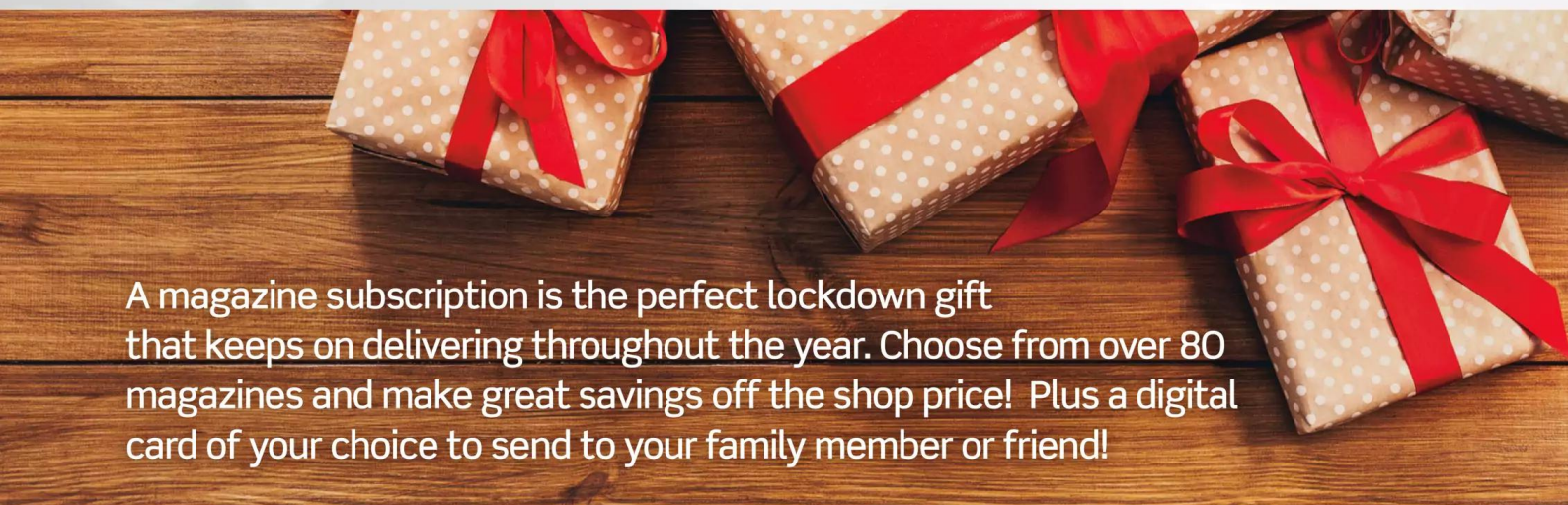
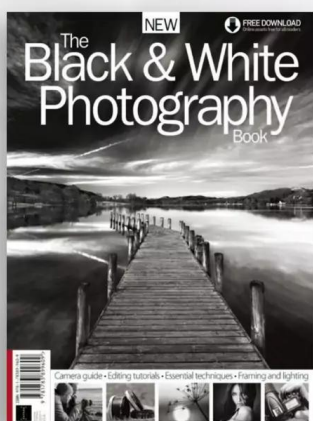
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BUYER'S GUIDE

The definitive guide to the best home-entertainment kit you can buy

From 65in 4K TVs to turntables, and from portable Bluetooth speakers to Dolby Atmos surround sound packages, here's where you'll find the perfect hi-fi and AV product, fast.

NEW ENTRIES THIS MONTH

The whole magazine this month, it being the Awards issue, is one huge Buyer's Guide. The last entrants before the new Award winners take their rightful place in the hallowed BG pages are a stunning pair of standmount speakers from KEF, a 48in Sony OLED TV and a fine JVC 4K projector. Next month sees wholesale changes!



JVC DLA-N5, p129

It's a major investment, but this will give you a stunning huge-screen 4K image

KEF LS50 Meta, p119

Brilliant new sound technology makes these even better than the original



NOW WITH THE BEST BUYS IN EVERY CATEGORY

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HOW TO POSITION YOUR SPEAKERS

It's not just a case of 'plonk 'em down and plug 'em in'; getting your speakers set up properly can make all the difference to how they sound. We show you how to get it right on page 121.

HEADPHONES JARGON BUSTED

Modern headphones come in a sometimes-baffling array of guises. Find out which type is right for you with our guide. See page 140.



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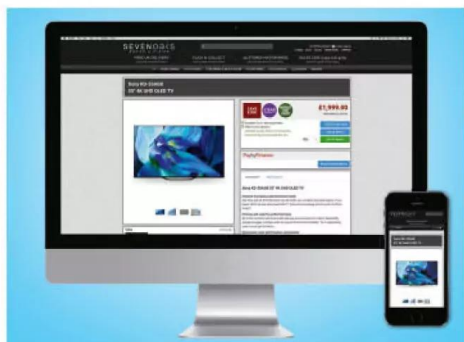
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Denon AVC-X3700H

DENON
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AV Receiver

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WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £750-£1500
KEF LS50 Meta

KEF
LS50 META • £999

Speakers

Instantly recognisable as the successor of the LS50, the LS50 Meta is born of the same KEF desire for continual development and is therefore fittingly the first loudspeaker to employ Metamaterial Absorption Technology. A result of joint development with the Acoustic Metamaterials Group, using Metamaterial Absorption Technology (MAT) breaks completely new ground in loudspeaker design, and once again demonstrates KEF's unrelenting passion for developing new technologies to improve your listening experience.



WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★
AWARDS 2020
BEST 48-50in TV
OVER £1000
Sony KD-48A9

SONY
KD-48A9 • £1799

48" 4K UHD OLED TV

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BEST SOUND AWARDS 2020
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Bowers & Wilkins 606 S2 Anniversary Edition



PSB • ALPHA P3
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PMC • TWENTY5-23i
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NEW £3850



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**MONITOR AUDIO
BRONZE 200**
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NEW £569



KEF • R3
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£1299

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**FOCAL
ARIA 906**
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£899

KEF

NEW

LS50 Wireless II
Wireless Speakers
£2249

The result of three years intensive research and development, the new KEF LS50 Wireless II is a fully active wireless stereo speaker system that delivers pristine, KEF signature sound coupled with great usability and high-performance wireless capability.



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BEST ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEM OVER £1000
KEF LS50 Wireless II

LSX
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£999

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WHAT HI-FI? BEST SOUND AWARDS 2020
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KEF LSX

naim

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Wireless Speaker
£749

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Naim Mu-so Qb 2

BLUESOUND 2i

Bluesound Generation 2i builds on the strengths and success of the Gen 2 platform and boasts several technological updates.

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Hi-Res Wireless Music Streamer
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YAMAHA • RX-V6A • AV RECEIVER
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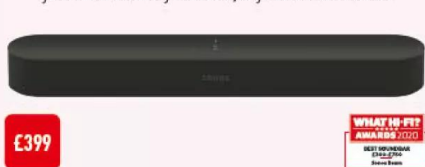
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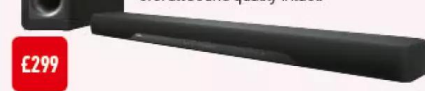
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Onkyo A-9010 £229

Best stereo amplifier under £300, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Our favourite budget amplifier, this is arguably the most entertaining affordable amp around. It is agile and has a wicked sense of rhythm.

Power 44W **Inputs** Line-in x5, MM **Outputs** Headphone



NAD D 3020 V2 £399

September 2018 ★★★★★

A very likeable effort that features a full-bodied sonic performance with fine timing and dynamics and lots of useful features.

Power 30W **Inputs** Line-in, MM, optical, coaxial, BT **Outputs** Headphone



Marantz PM6007 £499

November 2020 ★★★★★

Clearer and punchier than its Award-winning predecessor, Marantz's latest entry-level amplifier never puts the formidable 6000 Series dynasty in doubt.

Power 45W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM, coax, optical **Outputs** 6.3mm h'phone



Audiolab 6000A £599

December 2018 ★★★★★

An extremely well-featured amplifier – it even has Bluetooth – that impresses with superb clarity, refinement, and a big, airy soundstage.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in x3, MM, optical, coaxial **Outputs** Headphone



Rega Brio £599

Best stereo amplifier £400-£700, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

An upgrade on the Brio-R, this incredibly talented stereo amplifier offers a sound that's subtle, precise and engaging.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM **Outputs** 6.3mm headphone, record



Cambridge Audio CXA61 £750

Best stereo amplifier £400-£750, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Justifies the price premium over the Audiolab 6000A and the Rega Brio by delivering a superior combination of sonic ability features and build quality

Power 60W **Inputs** Line-in x4 **Outputs** Preamp, speaker x2, headphone



Musical Fidelity M2si £799

September 2019 ★★★★★

It doesn't have the feature list of many of its rivals, but the M2si counters with an impressively refined and entertaining performance

Power 76W **Inputs** Line-in x5 **Outputs** Preamplifier, tape loop



Rega Elex-R £949

Best stereo amplifier £700-£1500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Arguably the best-value amp Rega makes, with insight and a precise handling of rhythms that's hard to better even at double the price.

Power 72W **Inputs** Line-in x4, MM **Outputs** Preamp



Stereo amps up to £500

£500 to £1000

£1000 to £2000

Cambridge Audio CXA81 £999

Best stereo amplifier £750-£1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Class leaders are constantly being replaced in hi-fi – but rarely is it done so soundly as by Cambridge Audio's CXA81 integrated amplifier

Power 80W **Inputs** Line-in x4, XLR, USB **Outputs** Pre, sub, headphone

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Naim Nait 5si £1099

January 2015 ★★★★★

Naim's starter amp is an exceptionally polished performer which combines drama with the insight and subtlety to match the very best.

Power 60W **Inputs** Line-in x3 **Outputs** Headphone



Moon 240i £1990

Best stereo amplifier £1500-£2500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A gorgeous piece of kit that puts in a stunningly revealing and dynamic performance. The Moon 240i is in a class of its own.

Power 50W **Inputs** Line-in x2, MM, optical x2, coaxial x2 **Outputs** 3.5mm



Roksan Caspian M2 £2000

October 2013 ★★★★★

A supremely rounded product with solid build, classy aesthetics and a brilliant all-round sound that works well with all types of music.

Power 85W **Inputs** Line-in x5 **Outputs** Preamplifier



Naim Nait XS 3 £2199

Best stereo amplifier £1500-£2500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A fit and forget product in the best sense, the Nait XS 3 slots into your system and does just what you want – delivers music with emotional impact intact.

Power 70W **Inputs** Line-in x4 **Outputs** Preamplifier, headphone

AWARD
WINNER



Roksan Blak £2799

Best stereo amplifier £2500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A well equipped all-rounder with a powerful and energetic sound.

It's happy to work with a wide range of systems and musical genres too.

Power 150W **Inputs** Balanced XLR, line-in x3, MM, USB, aptX Bluetooth



Naim Supernait 3 £3499

Best stereo amplifier over £2500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

In adding a good-quality MM phono stage and tweaking the power amp section, Naim has made a great amplifier even better

Power 80W **Inputs** Line-in x5, MM, XLR **Outputs** Subwoofer, headphone

AWARD
WINNER



Leema Tucana II Anniversary Edition £4995

March 2017 ★★★★★

It looks no different to its 2010 incarnation, but this remains a top-class amp that works across a wide range of systems and music.

Power 150W **Inputs** Line-in x7 **Outputs** Preamp



Luxman L-509X £8500

June 2018 ★★★★★

Much more than an expensive retro throwback; its blend of build, features and performance is hard to better at this price.

Power 120W **Inputs** Line-in x6 **Outputs** Headphone, preamp



Audio Research GSi75 £14,998

April 2017 ★★★★★

This can stand toe-to-toe with the finest pre/power combos at this price; it's a well equipped one-box solution for high-end purists.

Power 75W **Inputs** Line-in x3, MM, MC, USB **Outputs** Headphone



£2000 to £5000

£5000 and above

Burmester 808 MK5 £28,000

February 2013 ★★★★★

Burmester's masterpiece may be decades old but a string of upgrades have kept it relevant. Sound quality remains exceptional.
Inputs Line-in, MM, MC (optional) **Outputs** Balanced, single-ended



Nagra Classic Pre/Power amp £29,000

August 2018 ★★★★★

Rivals have more muscle, but once in full flow the Nagra lets the music take centre stage. One of the finest pre/powers money can buy.
Power 100W **Inputs** Line-in x5, phono, XLR



Preamplifiers
and power amps

CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS

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Cambridge CXC £299

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

If you already have a DAC (the CXC is useless without one) we wouldn't hesitate in recommending this transport over a standalone CD player.
Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Marantz CD6007 £399

November 2020 ★★★★★

No one can accuse Marantz of pushing the boundaries on the CD6007, but it has taken an already excellent CD player and made it a bit better
Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Musical Fidelity M2sCD £699

June 2020 ★★★★★

Musical Fidelity's CD player sounds expansive, detailed and delicately layered - a resoundingly listenable proposition.
Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Cyrus CD t £895

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

An exceptionally talented transport, the CD t offers a level of insight, transparency and clarity you'd struggle to find elsewhere at this price.
Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Naim CD5si £1149

October 2014 ★★★★★

The CD5si boasts a full-bodied, winningly enthusiastic approach to music. The absence of digital outputs means there's no upgrade path.
Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, DIN



Cyrus CDi £1195

Best CD player £500+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Cyrus says this player is its best-sounding yet, and after listening to how confident and entertaining it sounds, it's hard to disagree.
Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, coaxial, optical



Roksan Caspian M2 CD £1999

Awards 2010 ★★★★★

The Caspian M2 CD has been around the block and is showing few signs of its age but it still combines skill with timing, dynamics and authority.
Type CD player **Outputs** Line-out, coaxial, optical, USB, XLR



Up to £1000

£1000 to £2000

£2000 and above

Marantz SA-10 £5999

April 2018 ★★★★★

One of the best digital source components around. Its unfussy disposition allows it to sound at home across a wide range of systems.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical

**Chord Blu MkII £7995**

January 2018 ★★★★★

The most informative and enjoyable sound we've heard from the CD format. Partner it with the DAVE and we doubt you can do better.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial x2 **Inputs** Coaxial, USB



DACs

A DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTER IS A MODERN HI-FI MUST

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Up to £200

Zorloo Ztella \$99

August 2020 (issue 437) ★★★★★

If you want to improve your smartphone sound, but don't want a USB stick hanging off the end of it, this is a bit of a no brainer. Online only for now.

Size 11cm long **Resolution** PCM (up to 384kHz), DSD (up to 5.6MHz), MQA

**Cyrus soundKey £99**

Best DAC under £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

An affordable, compact DAC that turns mobile listening into an authentic high-fidelity experience. iOS users may find connectivity a little inelegant.

Size 2 x 5 x 1cm **Resolution** 24-bit/96kHz

AWARD WINNER

**Audiolab M-DAC nano £149**

Best DAC £100-£200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

If you've got a good pair of wired headphones and want to improve your sound on the move, the Audiolab M-DAC nano makes a mighty strong case.

Inputs Bluetooth 4.2 **Size** 44 x 44 x 14mm **Res** 32-bit/384kHz

AWARD WINNER

**iFi hip-dac £149**

September 2020 (Issue 438) ★★★★★

The hip-dac's combination of battery power, fine build and easy-going sound quality makes it one of the front-runners at this level.

Inputs USB A **Size** 70 x 102 x 14mm **Res** 32-bit/384kHz; DSD 256



£200 to £1000

Audioquest DragonFly Cobalt £269

Best DAC £200-£300, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

If you loved the DragonFly Red and you're looking to make the next step up without compromising on size or form, this is something of a no-brainer

Size 6 x 2 x 1cm **Resolution** 24-bit/96kHz

AWARD WINNER

**Chord Mojo £399**

Best DAC under £300-£500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The majority of the Hugo's performance for a fraction of the price. An enthusiastic performer that stays refined and superbly balanced.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB **Size** 2 x 6 x 8cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz, DSD 512

AWARD WINNER

**Audiolab M-DAC+ £695**

August 2016 ★★★★★

Audiolab's follow up to the M-DAC gets a great deal right with a sound that's neat, tidy and expansive. The M-DAC+ demands your attention.

Inputs Coaxial x2, optical x2 **Size** 11 x 25 x 29cm **Res** 32-bit/384kHz



Chord Qutest £1195**Best DAC £500-£1200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

As with the 2Qute, the Qutest is a superior DAC which sets a new benchmark at this price with its clear and precise performance.

Inputs Coax x2, opt, USB **Size** 4 x 16 x 7cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz PCM, DSD512

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**Chord Hugo 2 £1799****Best DAC £1200+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

The Hugo 2 has a hefty price tag but, at this level, there isn't another DAC near that can communicate so unambiguously or so effortlessly.

Inputs Coax, opt, USB, BT **Size** 2 x 10 x 13cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz

AWARD WINNER**Chord DAVE £7995****Awards 2016 ★★★★★**

The uniquely named DAVE costs a lot, but we'd argue it's the best DAC money can buy. Build quality is excellent and the sound is very special.

Inputs Coaxial x2, opt x2, XLR **Size** 6 x 34 x 15cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz

**dCS Rossini DAC/Rossini Master Clock £22,608****July 2018 ★★★★★**

An expensive DAC/clock combination that justifies its price tag with a performance of exceptional detail, organisation and fine dynamics.

Inputs Coaxial x2, opt x2, USB x2 **Res** 24-bit/384kHz

**Nagra HD DAC/MPS £23,600****September 2018 ★★★★★**

An effort that boasts a natural, fluid and informative sound. If you're in the market for the ultimate DAC, this would certainly be a frontrunner.

Inputs Coax x2, opt, AES/EBU x2, USB **Res** 24-bit/384kHz



£1000 to £3000

£3000 and above

How to digitize your vinyl collection

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Turntables might not be cutting-edge tech, but for their look and feel – not to mention thrillingly articulate analogue sound – you can't beat them. The only thing your record collection lacks is portability, but there is a way to take those LPs with you wherever you go...

What do you need?

The basic building blocks are: a turntable, a phono stage, an analogue-to-digital converter with USB output, and a computer with suitable recording software. There are turntables that come with a phono stage, analogue-to-digital converter and USB output built in. However, most are at the budget end and focus on getting the job done rather than doing it particularly well.

Your recordings won't necessarily reflect the quality of sound possible from your records, though Audio Technica's AT-LP5 and Sony PS-HX500 vinyl-ripping decks do their best to buck that trend. If you already have a turntable, the best option is to buy a decent USB phono stage. We like the £90 Rega Fono Mini A2D and Pro-Ject also produce decent affordable alternatives.

Recording software

Channel D's Pure Vinyl offers a great deal of flexibility. It features built-in phono equalisation, so you can feed the turntable's output straight into the computer without needing a phono stage in the signal path. There are also powerful editing functions that aid optimisation. The downside is a price of around £250 once the trial period is over.

A more affordable alternative is VinylStudio. This includes many of the features of Pure Vinyl, and costs around £20. Another option is Audacity. It's free and does a good enough job. While the interface looks complicated and some of the editing functions take a while to figure out, spend some time with it and it will become familiar enough.

Patience is a virtue

Before you start, make sure your deck is working optimally as that will aid a better recording. Is the cartridge tip free from fluff? Are the tracking force and bias adjusted correctly? Simple checks like these can help. Vinyl can be recorded only in real time. If a song lasts five minutes, that's how long it will take. Make sure the player isn't jostled during the recording, and keep the playback volume low to reduce any degradation of sound caused by

feedback from the speakers. Make sure your records are spotless. Any hisses, clicks and pops will be recorded. You can buy software to edit such sounds but it's time-consuming and processing could spoil the recording.

It's all in the details

Storage is affordable, so we'd be tempted to go down the high-resolution route: 24-bit/96kHz is the norm for many studios and seems a good compromise between quality and memory space. It doesn't really matter whether it's WAV, AIFF or FLAC files as long as it's compatible with what you normally use. Records don't have metadata built in such as album art and track information, so that data has to be manually entered. The process is fairly tedious, but it makes it easy to locate tracks. Your computer won't recognise individual tracks, so you'll have to stop recording when you've finished ripping each one and mark tracks that flow into each other.



MUSIC STREAMERS

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£100 to £500

Audiolab 6000N Play £449

Best music streamer under £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A great, affordable way to implement streaming into your system without compromising sonic quality. The best budget solution we've seen...

Outputs Line-in, coaxial, optical, subwoofer

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Bluesound Node 2i £499

Best music streamer under £500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Even better than before, this large-scaled, well timed Bluesound has sensational streaming skills and features for the money.

Outputs Line-in, coaxial, optical, subwoofer



£500 to £1000

Cambridge CXN V2 £799

Best music streamer £500-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

All the success of the classy CXN streamer, with added Google Chromecast. Great design, features set and performance.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB x2

AWARD
WINNER



Chord 2go £995

July 2020 ★★★★★

The Chord 2go is a brilliant way to add streaming capability to the company's Award-winning Hugo 2 DAC (and only the Hugo 2). Works as a server too

Inputs Ethernet



£1000 to £5000

Cambridge Audio Azur 851N £1399

Best music streamer £1000-£1500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A sterling streamer that boasts excellent file support, plenty of connections and a sound that's both expressive and dynamic.

Inputs Coaxial x2, optical x2, USB x3



NAD C 658 £1499

Best music streamer £1000-£1500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

One of the most fully furnished, future-proofed and intuitive streamers we've come across – and one of the most convincing performers at this price.

Inputs Coaxial, optical, USB, phono, RCA

AWARD
WINNER



Moon Neo MiND £1799

Best music streamer £1500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

An elegant performer that delivers the kind of musical finesse we rarely hear at this price. You'll need to factor in the cost of a DAC.

Outputs Coaxial, optical, AES/EBU



Melco N100 £1999

June 2020 ★★★★★

An excellent choice if you're looking for a high-quality streamer with storage built-in and already have a capable DAC, or can add one.

Inputs USB 3.0 x2, ethernet **Outputs** USB 3.0



AWARD
WINNER

Naim ND5 XS 2 £2299

Best music streamer over £1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Naim's 'entry-level' network streamer? Fear not; if this is the best your system ever sounds, you'll be doing your ears mighty proud

Inputs USB, ethernet **Outputs** Line-out, DIN, coaxial, optical



Technics SL-G700 £2350

February 2020 ★★★★★

A high quality digital source that covers all the bases – including CD and SACD to go along with its terrific streaming smarts.

Inputs Coaxial, optical **Outputs** Line-out, balanced, coaxial, optical

**Cambridge Audio Edge NQ £3500**

March 2019 ★★★★★

A truly fantastic streaming preamplifier that has a clear, bold and spacious presentation across all its many inputs. And it looks good, too.

Inputs Line-in x2, balanced XLR, coaxial, optical x2, HDMI, USB x2, BT

**Moon 390 £4750**

February 2019 ★★★★★

A well connected streaming preamplifier that's uncluttered in design and use, and sounds terrifically dynamic, refined and engaging.

Inputs Line-in, MM/MC, balanced XLR, coaxial, optical, AES/EBU, HDMI x4

**Linn Selekt DSM £5250**

Reviewed online, 2019 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a top-end one-box electronics solution, this is a good place to start. Its modular approach to high-quality sound is admirable.

Inputs Line-in, MM, MC, coaxial x2, optical x2, HDMI, USB, AirPlay

**Linn Klimax DS3 £15,800**

February 2017 ★★★★★

If you want the finest-sounding music streamer on the market and aren't afraid of the heavyweight price, then invest your money here.

Outputs Balanced and single-ended XLR

£1000
to £5000

£5000 and above

RADIOS

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Pure Evoke H2 £89

Best radio under £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Pure's latest radio is similar to its previous incarnation, but more refined. The H2 improves on the D2's already sophisticated sound.

Battery Optional **Size (hwd)** 18 x 12 x 12cm **Inputs** 3.5mm

AWARD
WINNER

"There's no doubt the Pure Evoke H2 is an upgrade over the D2"

Roberts Stream 94i £189

Best radio over £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Sets the bar even higher than its predecessor, adding Bluetooth without compromising its sound and offering plenty of features.

Battery Optional **Size (hwd)** 26 x 17 x 13cm **Inputs** 3.5mm, USB, BT, wi-fi

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

"The Stream 94i is the complete package, making it the best radio at this price"

Roberts Revival iStream 3 £200

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

A lengthy features list – DAB/FM/internet radio, Bluetooth, Spotify, Tidal – under that vintage design makes for an appealing radio for the price.

Battery Yes **Size (hwd)** 16 x 26 x 11cm **Inputs** 3.5mm, USB, BT, wi-fi



"It has a warm, welcoming character, with focus on a rich midrange that celebrates vocals"

Revo SuperConnect £300

Best radio £200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Not just a radio, this feature-packed Revo is a streaming music player that will play just about anything from nearly any source.

Battery No **Size (hwd)** 18 x 27 x 12cm **Inputs** 3.5mm, Bluetooth, wi-fi



"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

Up to £200

£200 and above

STEREO SPEAKERS

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Standmounts up to £200

Dali Spektor 1 £159

March 2018 ★★★★★

A small speaker that inherits all the Spektor 2's good traits, pumping out an energetic and entertaining sound for an affordable price.

Size (hwd) 24 x 14 x 20cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"If you're looking really small budget speakers, buy these"

Dali Spektor 2 £199

Best standmount speaker under £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The 2s combine Dali's traditional strengths with a generous dose of entertainment that even Mission and Q Acoustics struggle to match.

Size (hwd) 17 x 28 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

**AWARD
WINNER**



"The way these speakers handle dynamics is impressive"

Elac Debut B5.2 £250

Best standmount speaker £200-£400, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

ELAC's latest budget standmounter is talented enough to worry the established competition.

Size (hwd) 34 x 18 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1

**AWARD
WINNER**



"These new Debuts should be considered one of the company's finest efforts"

Dali Oberon 1 £349

February 2019 ★★★★★

About the size of a shoe, these articulate and bold-sounding speakers have a wonderfully unfussy nature and are a joy to listen to.

Size (hwd) 27 x 16 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"Tonally, these are nicely judged and have a smooth treble that still has plenty of bite"

B&W 607 £399

April 2019 ★★★★★

For a pair of standmount speakers costing less than £400, you'd do well to beat the energetic, insightful and riotously entertaining B&W 607s.

Size (hwd) 30 x 17 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"Their energy and enthusiasm is ceaseless, their aim only to make us happy, as long as we keep feeding them"

Mission QX-2 £399

Best standmount speaker £350-£500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

These chunky speakers are hugely enjoyable. Fantastic rhythmic drive and terrific insight (and great finish) make them the best you can buy under £500.

Size (hwd) 32 x 22 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"These boxes are fun, with a lovely energetic character that takes a grip of the listener and refuses to let go"

KEF Q350 £499

Best standmount speaker £500-£750, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

KEF has delivered a speaker that's a cut above the rest, with a sophisticated, insightful presentation that belies its modest price.

Size (hwd) 36 x 21 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"The Q350s display a level of clarity and subtlety unheard of at this price"

B&W 606 S2 Anniversary £599

December 2020 ★★★★★

The original 606s are fine speakers, but this new version is obviously better across the board.

Size (hwd) 35 x 19 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"Given the modest nature of the changes we weren't expecting much of a difference in the sound. We were wrong"

Revel Concerta2 M16 £999

Best standmount speaker £750-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

One of the best speakers we've ever heard below the £1000 mark. Make sure to partner carefully to get the best out of them.

Size (hwd) 37 x 22 x 27cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

**AWARD
WINNER**



"They pound out crescendos with relish, refusing to harden or compress, even at high volume"

Standmounters from £200 to £500

£500 to £1000

Acoustic Energy AE1 Active £1000

June 2018 ★★★★★

Active speakers that deliver punch, drive and rhythmic ability. They outperform plenty of more expensive hi-fi components.

Size (hwd) 56.5 x 30 x 33cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"Simply put, these AE1s do everything they do with a flourish"

KEF LS50 Meta £1000

Awards 2020 ★★★★★

KEF has taken a terrific speaker and made it even better with its innovative Metamaterial tech. The LS50 Metas are now the class leader at this level.

Size (hwd) 31 x 20 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"We're soon marvelling at the Metas' delicacy and precision. They sound so much more transparent than before"

Wharfedale Linton £1000

May 2020 ★★★★★

You could listen to these speakers for days and still not get tired. Effortless weight, spot-on stereo imaging and layer upon layer of marvellous detail.

Size (hwd) 30 x 19 x 25cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3 **Active** Yes



"The moment we start listening, we get a brilliant sense of scale and space from the Lintons"

KEF R3 £1299

Best standmount speaker £1000-£2000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

These KEFs are exceptional. Knocking out the ATCs (below) to take home an Award, these are the most complete speakers at this price. Stunning.

Size (hwd) 42 x 20 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"The KEFs capture the natural acoustic of the recording superbly"

Dynaudio Xeo 10 £1300

March 2019 ★★★★★

Pricy, but these versatile active speakers offer fantastic sound that isn't compromised by convenience.

Size (hwd) 26 x 17 x 15cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2 **Active** Yes



"For small speakers, they sure belt out a large and spacious soundstage."

ATC SCM19 £2150

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

It's quite a trick for a speaker to be highly analytical with music, yet never sound clinical or passionless. But that's the case with the SCM19s.

Size (hwd) 44 x 27 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"We like the SCM19s' ability to render a large soundstage and populate it with well focused instruments"

Dynaudio Special Forty £2500

Best standmount speaker £2000+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

When paired with talented electronics, these standmounters will shine, offering a confident, muscular and subtle sound. Lots of fun.

Size (hwd) 36 x 20 x 32cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"They sound far bigger and more authoritative than a 36cm-high speaker has any right to"

ProAc Response D2R £3295

February 2020 ★★★★★

Wonderfully transparent, yet never overly analytical, these ProAc's excel at giving the music the limelight. We can't ask for any more than that.

Size (hwd) 43 x 21 x 26cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 6



"The Response D2Rs are wonderfully expressive speakers, even at low volumes"

Spendor Classic 2/3 £3295

August 2018 ★★★★★

They have their predecessor's easy-going nature, as well as the punch and rhythmic precision to work well with a wide range of music.

Size (hwd) 54 x 27 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"We can't think of a better all-round alternative at this price level"

Dynaudio Contour 20i £3999

October 2020 ★★★★★

These Dynaudios hold their own against formidable opposition, proving to be a supremely rhythmic and musically cohesive option.

Size (hwd) 44 x 21.5 x 36cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"If you want speakers that get to the heart of the music rather than just play the right notes, these should be high on your shortlist"

Standmounters from £1000 to £2000

Standmounters £2000 and above

£2000 and above

KEF Reference 1 £4999

July 2018 ★★★★★

These are superb all-rounders that work well across a wide range of music, systems and rooms. The dedicated stands are pricey though.

Size (hwd) 44 x 21 x 43cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"Rather than excel in a few specific areas, they perform well across the board"

Desktop speakers

Ruark Audio MR1 Mk2 £329

Best desktop speaker, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Gorgeous retro design and superb sound make the Mk2s an update that manages to be even more appealing than its predecessor.

Size (hwd) 17 x 13 x 14cm **Powered** Yes **Finishes** 1



"Quite simply, these are superb speakers of their type"

Floorstanders up to £800

Fyne Audio F302 £399

Best floorstander under £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The superlative F302s' full-bodied presentation and low-end presence make this another easy recommendation for this brand.

Size (hwd) 93 x 19 x 27cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"A speaker that belies its reasonable price tag at every turn"

Elac Debut 2.0 F5.2 £599

September 2019 ★★★★★

A mature, honest presentation, neither sucking the life out of a piece, nor exaggerating it. Elac is one of the few companies to do this with such aplomb

Size (hwd) 100 x 18 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1



"These Elacs can go low, but there is a bass clarity beyond the grasp of most floorstanders at this price"

Q Acoustics 3050i £649

Best floorstander £400-£800, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

These punchy and entertaining floorstanders are an improvement on their predecessors. They're well built and flexible about positioning, too.

Size (hwd) 102 x 31 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"The Q Acoustics have the subtlety to pick out textures and discern dynamics without combing over intricacies"

Dali Oberon 5 £699

Best floorstander £500-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A great option for floorstanders under £1000, these Dalis are fun-sounding speakers, with a great dose of transparency that's impressive for the price.

Size (hwd) 83 x 16 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"The Dali's sound simply flows in an organic and convincing manner"

£800 to £1000

Acoustic Energy AE309 £999

August 2019 ★★★★★

These are simply a fun, well-rounded pair of floorstanders that are as likeable as anything we've heard for less than a grand.

Size (hwd) 90 x 17.5 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"It's in the way everything hangs together; each piece of music is effortlessly whole"

Monitor Audio Silver 200 £999

Best floorstander £800-£1200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The latest generation of Silver speakers bring a sense of fun that was lacking in previous efforts. They are great all-round performers.

Size (hwd) 88 x 16 x 24cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 6



"A very mature performance, marked by rhythmic and instrumental organisation as well as balance."

Floorstanders £1000 - £2000

Fyne Audio F501 £1199

Best floorstander £1000-£1500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Another thrillingly accomplished effort from Fyne. Partner them well and they'll deliver a detailed, revealing and confident sound.

Size (hwd) 98 x 20 x 32cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"The F501s are an extremely confident calling-card"

Wharfedale Evo 4.4 £1199

Best floorstanding speaker £1000-£1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The Evo 4.4s are entertaining and detailed, with enough in the way of refinement to make them an excellent long-term choice.

Size (hwd) 106 x 25 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"Tying everything together is a fine sense of timing that results in surefooted rhythms"

B&W 603 £1249

June 2019 ★★★★★

The B&W 603s are floorstanding speakers that are up there with the best at this price. You should give them a whirl...

Size (hwd) 98.5 x 19 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"They are blessed with a wow factor that other speakers at this price can only dream of, especially with voices"

Neat Iota Alpha £1470

Best floorstander £1200-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

If you want fuss-free floorstanders that don't dominate the room, there are few better alternatives than this entertaining effort from Neat.

Size (hwd) 45 x 20 x 16cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"A surprisingly spacious presentation that wouldn't be out of place in rivals twice the height"

Revel Concerta2 F35 £1899

May 2019 ★★★★★

There aren't many speakers at this price that make listening to music as enjoyable as the Revel Concerta2 F35s

Size (hwd) 102 x 21 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"It's impressive how effortless the Revels sound. They dispatch any genre you throw their way with minimal fuss"

ProAc Response DT8 £1999

Best floorstander £1500-£2000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The DT8s deliver such an entertaining sound, we can't help but recommend them. Take a bit of care with system-matching and they will impress.

Size (hwd) 98 x 20 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 5 (plus 2 specials)



"The DT8s paint on an expansive sonic canvas, and locate instruments with precision and stability"

Spendor A7 £3200

Best floorstanders £2000+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

The A7s continue Spendor's knack for combining precision, clarity and subtlety with hugely enjoyable dynamics and rhythm.

Size (hwd) 94 x 18 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"The sound is terrifically clean and organised. The A7s also pack in bags of punch to keep things sounding lively"

PMC Twenty5.23 £3295

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

PMC has created a terrific pair of floorstanding speakers.

Match them with a suitably talented system and they will sing.

Size (hwd) 91 x 16 x 33cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"If you're looking for top-class floorstanders, we can't think of a better alternative"

Neat Iota Xplorer £3495

September 2018 ★★★★★

The Xplorers are another odd-looking pair of speakers from Neat, but they have a way of delivering music that's truly spellbinding.

Size (hwd) 74 x 30 x 22cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"If it's all about the music for you, as opposed to absolute sonic transparency, give these Neats a serious listen"

Floorstanders £1000 - £2000

£2000 to £5000

Positioning your speakers

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/features



It's no good spending hundreds of pounds on your new speakers if you then don't allow them to perform properly. Take care with positioning to get them to sing.

Wall or in the open?

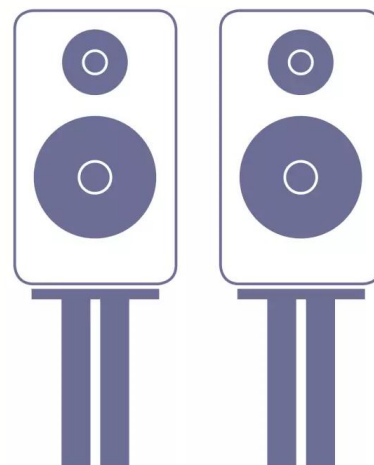
Where's the best place to position a speaker? Some speakers might sound better against a wall, while others prefer to be out in the open. Whatever your specific requirements, your speaker choice should primarily take into account how much space you have to house them.

Use a stand

Speaker stands keep the speaker cabinet rigid. This allows for more of the drivers' movement to be translated into sound and not wasted through vibrations. If your stands are on a carpet, make sure you have spikes to ensure stability.

Tweeter height

The higher-frequency sounds from a tweeter are more directional, and having them at ear level ensures optimum performance. So try to choose stands that will have your speaker at the right height for your seating position.



Floorstanders
£2000 to £5000**Q Acoustics Concept 500 £3999**

January 2018 ★★★★★

One of the most impressive high-end speakers we've heard in recent years, these offer insight, great bass and wide-ranging dynamics.

Size (hwd) 115 x 40 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"Capable of a performance that strongly challenges alternatives up to twice the price"

Sonus Faber Venere S £4998

March 2017 ★★★★★

There are more analytical alternatives available, but few deliver music in such an appealing manner. Impressively musical.

Size (hwd) 124 x 39 x 48cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"There are few speakers that manage to deliver music in such an appealing manner"

£5000 to £15,000

Audiovector SR3 Avantgarde £6320

January 2019 ★★★★★

These floorstanders match their impressive price with impressive sound. They demonstrate a good deal of organisation, stunning clarity and real punch.

Size (hwd) 103 x 19 x 33cm **Bi-wire** Tri-wire **Finishes** 8



"Importantly, they're subtle, conveying nuances with skill"

ATC SCM40A £6800

April 2014 ★★★★★

The price looks steep but factor in built-in amplification and exceptional sound, and the SCM40As emerge as something of a high-end bargain.

Size (hwd) 98 x 37 x 34cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2 **Active** Yes



"Once up and running, these ATCs are deeply impressive speakers"

£15,000 and above

JBL K2 S9900 £44,000

Best Temptation, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fantastic pair of speakers that deliver a spellbinding mix of dynamics, insight and finesse. Among the best speakers money can buy.

Size (hwd) 120 x 56 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"They charm and thrill. They make us happy or sad as the music demands. We can't get enough of them"

SYSTEMS

CONVENIENCE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN LOWER QUALITY

[View offers whf.cm/BBHifiSystems](http://whf.cm/BBHifiSystems)

Up to £500

Pro-Ject Juke Box E £369

Best turntable system, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

An impressive all-in-one system with a level of functionality that's difficult to replicate in individual separates for a similar price.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Inputs** Line-in, BT **Outputs** Line-out

AWARD WINNER

**Denon D-M41DAB £329**

Best microsystem, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Denon hasn't rested on its laurels. It's managed to better the M40, delivering improved sound and functionality. The best just got better.

Inputs CD, line-in, optical x2, BT, DAB/FM **Outputs** Subwoofer

AWARD WINNER



£500 to £1000

KEF LSX £999

Best all-in-one system, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

KEF has shrunk its excellent LS50 Wirelesses to create a wonderfully insightful and flexible pair of speakers with a neat, colourful design.

Inputs 3.5mm, optical, BT, AirPlay 2, wi-fi **Outputs** Subwoofer

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

**Marantz PM7000N £999**

Best system under £1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A practical, well-furnished just-add-speakers streaming system that impresses with its entertaining performance

Inputs USB, coaxial, optical, analogue, wi-fi **Outputs** Sub, headphone

AWARD WINNER



Arcam SA30 £1999

May 2020 ★★★★★

A fine example of how well music streaming can be implemented into traditional hi-fi – and how discreetly. Just add a control device and speakers.

Inputs Line-in x3, coaxial x2, opt x2, USB, MM and MC phono

**Naim Uniti Atom £1999**

Best hi-fi system £1000+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Rarely does a product look and sound this good. A triumph of design, the Atom boasts class-leading levels of insight and clarity.

Inputs Line-in, coaxial, opt x2, USB, BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Line-out, headphone

**KEF LS50 Wireless II £2250**

December 2020 ★★★★★

The LS50 Wireless IIs arrive with a world of expectation on their shoulders – and they well and truly meet them. This is a sequel of rare quality.

Inputs Line-in, optical, 3.5mm, HDMI (eARC), BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Subwoofer

**Naim Uniti Star £3499**

November 2018 ★★★★★

The Uniti Star is a great addition to Naim's streaming system range – and if you need CD replay, it's the obvious choice.

Inputs Line-in x2, DIN, coax x3, opt x2, USB, BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Line-out, DIN

**Dali Rubicon 2 C £3840**

May 2020 ★★★★★

Dali draws on its past achievements in passive and active speaker design to create this convenient and entertaining all-in-one speaker system.

Inputs Line-in, optical and coaxial digital, 3.5mm, aptX HD Bluetooth

**Naim Uniti Nova £4199**

January 2018 ★★★★★

It's a lot of money to pay for a system, but the Nova is as complete and convincing an argument for one-box convenience you're likely to hear.

Inputs CD, DIN, coaxial x2, optical x2, HDMI, BT, wi-fi **Outputs** Line-out

**Audio Pro System from £650**

Best multi-room system under £1000, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Audio Pro's multi-room system is not the most advanced, but no other system makes more sound-per-pound sense than this one.

Res 16-bit/44.1kHz **App** iOS, Android **Formats** MP3, FLAC, WMA

**Sonos System from £1047**

Best multi-room system £1000+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

If you don't need hi-res, Sonos is an obvious choice for multi-room. A great user experience alongside a full-bodied, insightful sound.

Res 16-bit/44.1kHz **App** iOS, Android **Formats** MP3, FLAC, WMA



TURNTABLES

DECKS TO KEEP THE VINYL REVIVAL THRIVING

View offers
whf.cm/BBTurntables

Pro-Ject Primary E £159

Best turntable under £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Pro-Ject has revised a budget deck to nail the under £150 market – and has succeeded on every front.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 11 x 42 x 33cm



£1000 to £2000

£2000 and above

Multi-room

£150 to £300

£150 to £300

Audio Technica AT-LP3 £199

Best turntable under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fully automatic turntable that doesn't scrimp on performance, this is the ideal entry-level deck for those looking to dip their 'vinyl toes' in.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 13 x 44 x 35cm



Sony PS-LX310BT £200

August 2019 ★★★★★

A no-nonsense, fully automatic turntable with built-in phono stage and Bluetooth, offering a surprisingly musical sound.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 11 x 43 x 37cm



Rega Planar 1 £249

Best turntable £200-£500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

This revamped entry-level deck from Rega doesn't sound anything like an entry-level deck. Pleasingly solid, accurate and agile – it's a lovely listen.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



Sony PS-HX500 £249

Best USB turntable, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A turntable with the ability to rip vinyl into hi-res files, but it's also an entertaining deck with a big, open sound.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 11 x 43 x 36cm



Pro-Ject Essential III £259

October 2017 ★★★★★

Another excellent turntable from Pro-Ject. The Essential III is easy to set up and offers a detailed and musical performance.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 11 x 42 x 33cm



Audio Technica AT-LP5 £299

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

A pleasure to use and listen to, the LP5 boasts both ease of use and the added bonus of a USB output. At this price there's none better.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 16 x 45 x 35cm



£300 to £500

Pro-Ject Debut III S Audiophile £325

June 2018 ★★★★★

Its solid design, smart finish and natural treble reinforce the Debut range's knack for delivering great, affordable sound.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 42 x 32cm



Rega Planar 1 Plus £329

July 2018 ★★★★★

All the sonic talents of the Planar 1 with an equally talented phono stage built in. The Plus is a winning combination of convenience and excellent quality.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



£500 to £1000

Rega Planar 3/Elys 2 £649

Best turntable £500-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Rega builds on the 3's predecessor by adding extra servings of clarity, precision and insight. The result is the best RP3 yet.

Speed 33½, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 36cm



Technics SL-1500C £899

Best turntable £750-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

With a really good built-in phono stage and an auto-lift function, this Technics is a beautifully made, fuss-free record player that sounds great

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 23 x 16 x 12cm



Clearaudio Concept £1195

Best turntable £800-£1200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A thoroughly sorted, easy-to-own package with tremendous sound, combining punch, extension and tonal variation in equal measure.

Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14 x 42 x 35cm



EAT B-Sharp Super Pack £1368

July 2018 ★★★★★

EAT's entry-level deck is a fine one that can count among its talents a sense of control, sure composure and a well judged sonic balance.

Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14 x 46 x 35cm



Rega Planar 6/Ania £1469

Best turntable £1000+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A refined, articulate and precise turntable that's lovely to listen to. It requires good system-matching to get the best out of it though.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 12 x 45 x 37cm



Vertere DG-1 Dynamic Groove £2850

Online ★★★★★

The Vertere DG-1 is up against some mighty competition, but given what we've heard it can go into any such comparisons with confidence.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 13 x 38 x 37cm



Rega Planar 8/Apheta 2 £2439

Best turntable over £1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Clever engineering and sky-high standards make this Rega's most ambitious and boundary-pushing turntable yet. It's gorgeous in sound and design.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 13 x 42 x 32cm



VPI Prime £4200

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

A confident-sounding package that can organise with the best and maintain composure even when faced with the most challenging music.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 18 x 54 x 40cm



VPI Prime Signature £6000

February 2018 ★★★★★

This upgraded version of the standard Prime builds on that model's strengths, with more insight, stronger dynamics and a lovely stability.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 18 x 54 x 40cm



Vertere Acoustics MG-1 MkII/Mystic £9300

Online ★★★★★

Renders sound with a combination of precision, agility and dynamic dexterity that we haven't heard bettered by any rival near this price.

Speed 33⅓, 45rpm Size (hwd) 18 x 54 x 40cm



Clearaudio Innovation Wood/DaVinci V2 £15,900

2010 ★★★★★

This gorgeous, mind-blowingly expensive turntable is so good, we've been using it as our reference deck for years now. Extravagant, but it's worth it.

Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14 x 47 x 39cm



Linn Klimax LP12 £18,670

July 2017 ★★★★★

A mightily expensive deck that has the unmistakable feel of real quality. It's startlingly better than previous LP12 turntables.

Speed 33⅓, 45, 78rpm Size (hwd) 14 x 45 x 36cm



£1000 to £2000

£2000 to £10,000

£10,000 and above

WIRELESS SPEAKERS

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whf.cm/BBWirelessSpeakers

Up to £100

Ultimate Ears Roll 2 £60**Best wireless speaker under £100, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

The Roll 2 has a sound that's more open, more dynamic and goes louder than that of its predecessor. The drop in price makes this a bargain.

Size (hw) 4 x 14cm **Battery** 9 hours

"The same sense of fun as the previous model, but there's a touch of maturity with the Roll 2"

Ultimate Ears Wonderboom 2 £90**Best portable wireless speaker under £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

If you want a travelling companion you can rely on, this portable, rugged and durable speaker is a great-sounding option.

Size (hw) 10.5 x 9.5cm **Battery** 13 hours

"The Wonderboom 2 delivers a sound as cohesive and detailed as we could hope for at the price"

JBL Flip 5 £120**March 2020 ★★★★★**

A simple, portable Bluetooth speaker that sounds as good as £120 can buy. An impressively weighty performance, and overall solid sonic chops.

Size (hwd) 7.4 x 18 x 7cm **Battery** 12 hours

"JBL's latest offering sounds great and is an excellent proposition for the money"

Sonos One SL £149**March 2020 ★★★★★**

A Sonos One without the smarts, the SL (unlike the Play:1) will pair with a One to make a stereo pair – but it sounds great as a standalone as well.

Size (hwd) 16 x 12 x 12cm **Battery** No

"The sonic performance, streaming options and app support are among the best we've tested at this level"

£100 to £200

Ultimate Ears Megaboom 3 £170**Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★**

The rugged, weather-proof Megaboom 3's sleek design and improved sound are worth your time, especially at under £200.

Size (hwd) 23 x 9 x 9cm **Battery** 20 hours

"An enthusiastic sound that favours excitement while still keeping an eye on balance"

Audio Pro Addon T5 £179**Best wireless speaker under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

An impressive stationary wireless speaker that offers great dynamism, a clear and transparent sound and a good sense of timing.

Size (hwd) 13 x 25 x 15cm **Battery** No

"You'll be hard pressed to get much better without dipping a lot deeper into your piggy bank"

Audio Pro A10 £180**February 2019 ★★★★★**

A brand-new cylindrical design, but underneath that trendy outfit is the hugely enjoyable sonic character that we love from Audio Pro.

Size (hwd) 19 x 14 x 14cm **Battery** No

"It snaps along with that same intensity and intelligent organisation we've come to expect"

£200 to £500

Audio Pro Addon C3 £249**Best wireless speaker £100-£250, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

A smaller version of the talented and similarly-featured C5, this petite Audio Pro sets itself apart by being battery-powered and portable.

Size (hwd) 12 x 22 x 14cm **Battery** 15 hours

"By multi-room speaker standards, this is a remarkably refined performance"

Audio Pro Addon C10 £269**Best wireless speaker £250-£500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

The big daddy of the Audio Pro multi-room system, this has a rich, powerful performance, great timing and a more spacious presentation than any rival.

Size (hwd) 16 x 32 x 18cm **Battery** No

"The scale of the sound is impressive, digging down into the low frequencies with warmth and punch"

Audio Pro Drumfire £649**Best wireless speaker £500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

Audio Pro's biggest and loudest speaker features a performance that combines tight bass, a clear midrange and a good sense of space.

Size (hwd) 65 x 52 x 19cm **Battery** No

"As an all-in-one system which connects to a multitude of sources, the Drumfire is a great choice"

B&O BeoPlay A6 £729**February 2016 ★★★★★**

Oozing style and substance, the A6 effortlessly combines the simplicity and convenience of a one-box system. It's a job fully well done.

Size (hwd) 30 x 54 x 16cm **Battery** No

"The A6 will stream pretty much anything from anywhere and in any way you like"

Naim Mu-so Qb 2nd Generation £749**Best home wireless speaker over £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

The greatest value here is not found in the features or design, but in a sonic performance that will effortlessly dispense of any one-box rival near this price.

Size (hd) 17 x 14cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Siri**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

"The overall presentation is muscular but lean; there's plenty of bass weight, but balance is never skewed"

Bowers & Wilkins Formation Wedge £899**November 2019 ★★★★★**

The B&W Formation Wedge offers the kind of detailed, balanced, cohesive sound that cannot be ignored – making it a class-leader in its category.

Size (hwd) 26 x 28 x 26cm **Battery** No

"The Wedge isn't afraid to let you hear the truth. Vocals are clear, textured and emotive"

Naim Mu-So 2 £1299**September 2019 ★★★★★**

We're surprised just how much sonic progression the Naim Mu-so 2 brings over the original – Naim says that 95 per cent of the Mu-so 2 is new.

Size (hwd) 12 x 63 x 26cm **Battery** No

"Musicality is still at the heart of the Mu-so 2's performance as a soundbar"

Linn Series 3 £2950**April 2020 ★★★★★**

The most expensive wireless speaker we've ever tested also happens to be the best. It's hardly a bargain, but we are left convinced of its appeal.

Size (hwd) 30 x 25 x 21cm **Battery** No

"The Series 3 may not look like it, but make no mistake, this is proper hi-fi"

Amazon Echo Plus (2018) £140**January 2019 ★★★★★**

The 2nd-gen Plus is Amazon's flagship smart speaker, and it finally has the sonic talents to match its smarts – especially at this price.

Size (hwd) 15 x 10 x 10cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Alexa

"Its sonic performance makes it worthy in isolation"

Sonos One £199**Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

Essentially a Play:1 with Alexa. The odd software niggle at launch, but one of the best wireless speakers around just got smarter.

Size (hwd) 16 x 12 x 12cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Alexa

"The soundstage is spacious and impressively organised, with vocals given plenty of breathing room"

Ultimate Ears Megablast £270**February 2018 ★★★★★**

Featuring Amazon's Alexa voice assistant in a portable speaker, the Megablast is Ultimate Ears' most energetic and controlled speaker yet.

Size (hwd) 24 x 9 x 9cm **Battery** 16 hours **Voice assistant** Alexa

"The Megablast has no problem filling up our medium-sized listening room with a sound that demands your attention."

Apple HomePod £319**April 2018 ★★★★★**

It works best if you're in the Apple ecosystem, but nevertheless it's the best-sounding, most music-orientated smart speaker available.

Size (hd) 17 x 14cm **Battery** No **Voice assistant** Siri

"It's capable of going loud, and remains composed, clear and unflustered, even at maximum volume"

£500 and above

Smart speakers



HOME CINEMA

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

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whf.cm/BBBlurayPlayers

Up to £500

Panasonic DP-UB150EB £129

March 2020 ★★★★★

A highly competent machine at an impressively low price, this 4K Blu-ray player represents a big step up from streaming your UHD content.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out** 1



Sony UBP-X700 £199

Best 4K Blu-ray player under £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

This 4K player delivers a stunningly natural picture for an affordable price. It'll be tough to knock this Sony off its perch.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, SACD, CD **HDMI out** 2



Panasonic DP-UB820EB £290

Best 4K Blu-ray player £350-£500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Delivers on multiple fronts, supporting all major HDR formats, delivering a hugely immersive and impactful picture, and all backed up by strong audio.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out** 2



£500 and above

Sony UBP-X1100ES £749

November 2019 ★★★★★

Picture quality is excellent and it backs this up with an entertaining and musical sound that is up there with the best at the money.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, SACD, CD **HDMI out** 2



Panasonic DP-UB9000 £849

Best Blu-ray player £500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A razor-sharp picture with fine detail and an excellent colour balance all help to deliver a picture that has a rare realism.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out** 2



Pioneer UDP-LX500 £999

Best 4K Blu-ray player over £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Pioneer's premium 4K player delivers a double whammy of superb picture and awesome sound quality. If your system warrants it, buy with confidence

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD **HDMI out** 2



HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

POWERFUL SOUND THAT TRULY BRINGS MOVIES TO LIFE

View offers
whf.cm/BBHomeCinemaAmps

Up to £500

Sony STR-DN1080 £429

Best home cinema amplifier under £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Sony's latest AV amp is a return to form, with cutting-edge features (inc. Dolby Atmos) and a compelling sound. It ticks all the right boxes.

Power 7 x 100W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 6/2



AVR-X2700H £599

December 2020 ★★★★★

Sonic improvements over its predecessor are marked, even if it's the 8K passthrough and next-gen gaming tech that steal the headlines.

Power 7 x 150W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 6/2



£500 to £1000

Denon AVR-X3600H £999

Best home cinema amplifier £500-£1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Denon has nudged its 3000 series home cinema amplifiers much closer to the next level with this stunningly powerful performer.

Power 7 x 180W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 8/3

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

**Denon AVC-X6700H £2299**

November 2020 ★★★★★

Want to future-proof your set-up for the 8K content due to arrive within the five or ten year lifespan of your next amp? This Denon is a winner.

Power 11 x 140W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 8/3



£1000 and above

PROJECTORS

BECAUSE A MASSIVE PICTURE IS HOME CINEMA

View offers
whf.cm/BBProjectors**Optoma UHD40 £1199**

Best projector under £1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A '4K' projector that brings top-tier technology to a budget price point, this device boasts punchy colours and insightful detail.

Throw ratio 1.21:1-1.59:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, VGA, 3.5mm **Speakers** Yes

AWARD WINNER



Up to £2000

LG CineBeam HU80KSW £1967

December 2019 ★★★★★

An all-in-one, do-it-all 4K portable projector that does its thing with aplomb. You can have the CineBeam up and running in a matter of minutes.

Throw ratio 1.3:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2 **Speakers** Yes

**Epson EH-TW9400 £2549**

Best projector £1500-£3000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The perfect compromise if you want a super-sized faux-4K picture on a budget. The picture vibrancy and sense of depth are impressive.

Throw ratio 1.35-2.84:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, USBx2 **Speakers** No

AWARD WINNER

**Optoma UHD65 £2999**

Best projector £1500+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

It may not have the bells and whistles of a high-end 4K projector, but it puts in a sophisticated performance, is future-proof and well priced.

Throw ratio 1.39-2.22:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2, PC x2, Phono **Speakers** No



£2000 to £10,000

Sony VPL-VW270ES £5000

Best projector over £3000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Sony is one of the few brands making native 4K projectors and its latest is a stunning showcase of class-leading sharpness and subtlety. Gorgeous.

Throw ratio 1.37-2.83:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2 **Speakers** No

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

**JVC DLA-N5 £6495**

Awards 2020 ★★★★★

Even at this price, this JVC projector is a bargain. It offers a decent slice of the range-topping performance at a fraction of the cost.

Throw ratio 1.36-2.75:1 **Inputs** HDMI x2 **Speakers** No



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PVRs

Humax FVP-5000T from £199

Best PVR, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

If you need a Full HD box to give your older TV some more sparkle, Humax's digital box should absolutely be something to consider.

Tuners 3 Storage 500GB Ultra HD No

AWARD
WINNER



Subscription
boxes

Sky Q 2TB from £199

Best subscription box, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Sky has overhauled its TV package with Q and made it more enticing and versatile thanks to 4K support, but it comes with a high price tag.

Tuners 4 Storage 2TB Ultra HD Yes

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



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Up to £500

Yamaha YAS-207 £249

Best soundbar under £300, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The latest in a series of fine Yamaha soundbars, this is a compelling, class-leading performer in a practical, easy-to-use package.

Size (hwd) 6 x 93 x 11cm Inputs Opt, HDMI, 3.5mm, BT Sub Yes

AWARD
WINNER



Sonos Beam £399

Best soundbar £300-£500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A compact soundbar that pumps out an exceptional sound for its size and price. It could potentially transform your listening experience.

Size (hwd) 7 x 65 x 10cm Inputs Optical, HDMI ARC, AirPlay Sub No

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Sonos Playbar £699

August 2017 ★★★★★

It's not perfect, but it still has the sonic heft and all-round quality to edge out its Sonos Playbase stablemate.

Size 9 x 90 x 14cm Inputs Optical, ethernet Sub No



Yamaha YSP-2700 £699

February 2017 ★★★★★

With a spacious, involving sound the YSP-2700 is the most convincing surround experience you'll get outside of a full 5.1 surround system.

Size (hwd) 5 x 94 x 15cm Inputs HDMI x3, opt, coax Sub Yes



Dali Katch One £649

Best soundbar £500-£1000, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Great for music, even better for films, this tidy soundbar delivers all the sound your living room is likely to need.

Size 7 x 86 x 17cm Inputs HDMI, Optical, 3.5mm Sub No

AWARD
WINNER



Dali Kubik One £799

Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A gorgeous and complete package, Dali's debut soundbar impresses with its hugely engaging sound and smart, well equipped exterior.

Size (hwd) 15 x 98 x 10cm Inputs Line-in x2, optical Sub No



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£500
to £1000**Sonos Arc £799****August 2020 (issue 437) ★★★★★**

The Arc is a stunning performer, delivering one of the most immersive Dolby Atmos experiences we've heard from a soundbar.

Size 9 x 114 x 12cm **Inputs** HDMI, Optical, ethernet **Sub** No

£1000
and above**Sony HT-ST5000 £1199****Best soundbar £1000-£1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Delivers an accomplished Atmos performance we'd have no hesitation in recommending. It is a superb-sounding effort for the price.

Size (hwd) 8 x 118 x 15cm **Inputs** HDMI x3, opt, USB, 3.5mm **Sub** Yes

**AWARD
WINNER****Sennheiser Ambeo Soundbar £2199****Best soundbar over £1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

This is the best soundbar we've tested, and the best way to get surround sound into your room without filling it with loads of individual speakers.

Size (hwd) 14 x 127 x 17cm **Inputs** HDMI x4, opt, RCA line in **Sub** No

**AWARD
WINNER**

Soundbases

Q Acoustics M2 £169**Best soundbase, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Q Acoustics can now add 'soundbase' to its list of successes. The M2 is an expressive, easy-to-use and fuss-free way of boosting your TV sound.

Size (hwd) 9 x 55 x 34cm **Inputs** Line-in, HDMI, 3.5mm, BT

**AWARD
WINNER**

SPEAKER PACKAGES

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Up to £1000

Wharfedale DX-2 £399**Best speaker package under £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Wharfedale delivers movie magic on a small scale with this enjoyable, well integrated package that's perfect for smaller rooms and budgets.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 12 x 31 x 12cm **Finishes** 2

**AWARD
WINNER**

"It has all the detail, attack and deftness to deliver exhilaration in spades"

Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack £895**Best speaker package £500-£1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

The subwoofer needs a bit more kick, but this fantastic sub-£1000 5.1 package delivers a clear, well-balanced and expressive performance.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4

**AWARD
WINNER**

"This compact set really hits the spot with its great clarity, integration, expression and ample bass weight"

£1000 to £3000

B&W MT-50 £1100**Awards 2015 ★★★★★**

These speakers sound crisp, clear and insightful, and the sub and satellites integrate so well. Value and versatility combined.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 25 x 11 x 16cm **Finishes** 2



"It has all the detail, attack and deftness to deliver exhilaration in spades"

Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack £1345**Best speaker package £1000-£1500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Add in floorstanders to the above, and this speaker package hits the sweet spot with an infectiously musical and powerful performance.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4

**AWARD
WINNER**

"It's worth stressing just how talented the 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack is. It's an instant hit"



FOR A FULL LIST OF SPECIFICATIONS AND IN-DEPTH REVIEWS VISIT **WHATHIFI.COM**

Monitor Audio Bronze B5 AV £1489**Best speaker package £1000-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

This classy speaker package from Monitor Audio is beautifully designed, has ample punch, creates a spacious soundfield and is very musical.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 17 x 46 x 19cm **Finishes** 4

"This may be the easiest £1500 you'll ever spend"

Elac Debut 2.0 5.1 Home Theatre System £1499**October 2019 ★★★★★**

This Elac package is a real match-winner, whether for your two-channel or the full surround. You'll be hard pushed to find better at this price.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 18 x 54 x 22cm **Finishes** 1

"What's astonishing is the realism of the soundscape – a delightfully balanced audio image that lets the equipment melt away"

Dali Oberon5 5.1 £1795**Best speaker package £1500-£2000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

These are clever performers: lean, attractive, interesting and unfussy. And those words stand for both the aesthetics and the acoustics.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 44 x 30cm **Finishes** 4**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

"There's surprising authority and power to this relatively diminutive package as well..."

KEF Q350 AV 5.1 £2100**January 2018 ★★★★★**

It takes up a fair bit of space, but the Q350 package puts in a powerful and precise performance. You'll struggle to do better for the money.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 21 x 63 x 30cm **Finishes** 2

"If you have the space, then you should consider opening your home to this outstanding KEF package"

Monitor Audio Silver 200 AV12 £2865**Best speaker package £2000-£5000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

A little patience may be required, but once it hits its stride the Silver 200 AV12 is an expressive, fun and talented speaker package.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 45 x 20cm **Finishes** 6**AWARD WINNER**

"Rarely are we so fully behind a speaker package for its work both in stereo and in surround sound"

ATC C1 5.1 £3595**Awards 2016 ★★★★★**

We'd like a bit more authority in the bass, but we're delighted by the detailed, agile sound, focused surround steering and power on offer.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 41 x 28cm **Finishes** 2

"For small to medium-sized rooms, we can think of no better alternative"

PMC Twenty5.23 5.1 £10,290**Best speaker package over £5000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Analytical and fun in equal measure, this gorgeous PMC system – also our current reference speaker package – is entirely worth the high asking price.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 17 x 55 x 31cm **Finishes** 4**AWARD WINNER**

"The greater insight and texture make this one of the most lifelike reproductions of the human voice at this price"

VIDEO STREAMERS

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Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K £50**Best video streamer under £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Despite some caveats, this 4K device supports all HDR formats and delivers excellent picture quality for a very affordable price.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **4K** Yes**AWARD WINNER**

Up to £100

Apple TV 4K £179**Best video streamer over £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

It has a fantastic UI and design, a huge library of 4K HDR content, and the best picture and sound performance at any price. Siri is useful, too.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **4K** Yes**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

£100 and above

Sony PS4 Pro £350

February 2017 ★★★★★☆

The Pro offers a solid, relatively affordable upgrade over the base PS4, but still needs work to be an all-in-one 4K streamer and player.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 1080i, 720p **Storage** 1TB **4K** Yes

**Microsoft Xbox One X £410**

January 2018 ★★★★★☆

A capable, all-consuming box of 4K tricks. The interface has never been better and the jump in picture quality and audio abilities is welcome.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 1080i, 720p **Storage** 1TB **4K** Yes



TELEVISIONS

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Samsung UE43RU7470 £399

Best 40-43in TV, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

For a size of TV that is all too often overlooked, we're delighted to see that Samsung has served up a stunning 4K TV for the average household.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 3 **Resolution** 3840 x 2160 **Tuner** Freesat HD, TV Plus



"There's a proper sense of depth to the image, with excellent shading in both bright and dark areas"

**Samsung UE49RU8000 £749**

Best 49-50in TV under £800, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

This is a brilliant buy, offering most of what makes the Q70R great at a reduced price. It's a great all-rounder with exciting HDR performance.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freeview HD/YouView



"It's a brilliantly detailed image with sharp, clearly defined edges that render scenes with excellent depth"

**Sony KD-49XG9005 £999**

Best 49-50in TV over £800, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

This is a lovely TV to watch, it sounds good by prevailing standards, and its app selection leaves you wanting for little. Buy with confidence.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freeview HD/YouView



"Whites are pure and bright, edges are razor sharp and light-to-dark contrast is pronounced"

**Sony KD-49XH9505 £1000**

August 2020 (issue 437) ★★★★★

Features a number of upgrades that make it a better TV than the Award-winner it replaces. This is an all-round cracker.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freeview HD/YouView



"Tweaked accordingly, the XH9505 puts in a lovely performance"

LG OLED48CX £1499

October 2020 ★★★★★

The first 4K OLED smaller than 50 inches also happens to be the very best TV smaller than 50 inches that we've ever tested.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/Freeview HD



"This is not a downgraded flagship TV – it's a downsized flagship TV"

Sony KD-48A9 £1799

Awards 2020 ★★★★★

It's undeniably expensive, but the Sony KD-48A9 OLED TV is simply the best sub-55-inch television you can buy right now.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freeview HD/YouView



"For sharpness and detail, there's never been a better TV at this size"

LG OLED55C9PLA £1399

Best 55in TV, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Colours are insanely good, contrast levels are cracking. It's super sharp and detailed. We'd have it at home in a heartbeat

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freeview/Freesat HD



"We switch to *Blue Planet II*, and while the colours really zing, it's the detail that grabs us from the off."

Panasonic TX-58GX800 £739**Best 55-58in TV under £1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Panasonic has packed this set with fancy features, and priced it incredibly aggressively. This is a superb-value large-screen television.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 3 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD

"Colours are brilliantly judged, proving tonally natural and nuanced in their gradients"

Samsung QE55Q80T £1599**August 2020 (issue 437) ★★★★★**

Thanks to its dynamic and solid picture, substantial sound and exhaustive app selection, this mid-range Samsung TV sets a formidable benchmark.

Type QLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/Freeview HD

"The Q80T also combines a neutral colour temperature with the ability to produce real vibrancy"

Panasonic TX-55GZ950B £1799**November 2019 ★★★★★**

The Panasonic GZ950 is a fine TV that will be particularly appealing to those who would rather not buy a separate sound system.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD

"It may not be flashy, but the Panasonic TX-55GZ950B is a real contender"

Panasonic TX-55GZ2000 £2999**February 2020 ★★★★★**

Dolby Atmos sound is the headline-grabber, but the picture is just as important – a huge achievement by Panasonic, beating LG at its own game

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freesat/Freeview HD

"Those picture upgrades are so special that this is the best OLED TV we've tested"

Samsung QE65Q70R £1299**Best 65in TV under £2000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

The Q70R makes the dream of a healthy chunk of flagship performance without spending flagship money a reality.

Type QLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/Freeview HD

"Detail and definition are exceptional. Edges are razor-sharp without looking artificially enhanced"

Sony KD-65XF9005 £1749**Best 65in TV under £2500, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

A mid-range TV that punches above its weight, delivering fantastic detail and an image that's brilliantly bright and punchy.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD

"Delivers a picture performance not significantly short of the very best flagship models of 2017"

LG OLED65C9PLA £3299**Best 65in TV over £2000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

LG has squeezed yet more performance from its OLED panel.

The C9 is natural, dynamic and rich – and it sounds good, too.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freesat/Freeview HD

"Each year, LG squeezes more performance from its panels, making a picture that defies expectations"

LG OLED65GX £3499**July 2020 ★★★★★**

LG has managed to improve picture quality in a few key areas, with dark detail, colour richness and motion handling all getting a worthwhile boost

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** Freesat/Freeview HD

"There's an extra lusciousness and nuance to the colour palette that makes things look that bit more organic and true to life"

Sony KD-65AF9 £3999**December 2018 ★★★★★**

The Sony AF9 is a stunner in so many ways, not to mention one of the best-sounding tellies we've tested.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD

"Exceptional motion processing, superb detail, awesome 1080p delivery, and excellent sound"

Philips 65OLED984 £4499**April 2020 ★★★★★**

This is a fabulous TV conjoined to one of the best 'soundbars' we've heard, and the result is an all-in-one system unlike any other.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** 4K **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD

"This Philips set consistently blows us away with its vibrant, punchy and pin-sharp delivery"

50in to 60in

65in and above



PORTABLE HEADPHONES

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Beyerdynamic Byron £39

Best in-ears under £50, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

A spectacular return to the budget earphone arena for Beyerdynamic, the Byron sets the standard at this price with a peerless performance.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



SoundMagic E11C £50

Best in-ear headphones under £50, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The latest version of Soundmagic's budget in-ears continues to impress with a full-bodied, energetic and informative sound.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Beyerdynamic Soul Byrd £69

April 2019 ★★★★★

You'll struggle to find a better pair of in-ear headphones costing less than £70 than these Beyerdynamics.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m

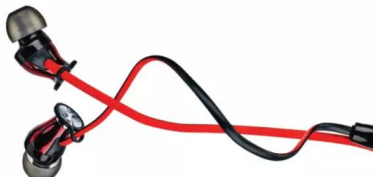


Sennheiser Momentum M2 IEi £70

Best in-ears £50-£100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

You wouldn't think anything so small could sound quite so good – not for just £70. But they are wonderfully smooth, expressive and balanced.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.3m



Klipsch T5M Wired £70

Best in-ear headphones £50-£100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Not only do they have some of the most comfortable tips around, but these T5M Wireds also show a maturity that's rare at this price.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.3m



Klipsch R6i II £89

Awards 2018 ★★★★★

2018's Product of the Year in-ear headphones are as natural and transparent as they come at this price. Few can match their insight.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Bose SoundSport Pulse £179

February 2017 ★★★★★

The best-sounding pair of wireless in-ears we've heard so far. The modest battery life is a downside, but the sound is fun and enjoyable.

In-line controls Yes Cable length n/a



FOR A FULL LIST OF SPECIFICATIONS AND IN-DEPTH REVIEWS VISIT WHATHIFI.COM

In-ears up to £100

£100 to £200

Shure SE425 £185**Best in-ears over £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

If you're serious about the quality of your in-ear headphones, we'd point you here. The energetic, immersive performance is irresistible.

In-line controls Yes **Cable length** 1.6m**AWARD WINNER**

£100 to £200

Sony WI-1000X £206**February 2018 ★★★★★**

The best of both worlds thanks to great sound and fine noise-cancelling capabilities. Absolutely worth your time and money.

In-line controls Yes **Cable length** 1m

£200 to £500

AKG N40 £249**Best in-ears £300+, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

These sound great, but you'll need a decent portable DAC and hi-res tracks to make the most of them, so they're not for the casual user.

In-line controls No **Cable length** 1.2m

£500 and above

Shure KSE1500 £2549**November 2016 ★★★★★**

At this price they won't be for everyone, but they are the finest in-ears we've heard and arguably one of the best headphones money can buy.

In-line controls Yes **Cable length** 1.3m**AKG Y50 £69****Best portable on-ear headphones, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Our Product of the Year cans for 2019 are portable on-ears, and deliver a rhythmic, clear, detailed, dynamic sound. At this price they're amazing.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 190g**PRODUCT OF THE YEAR**

On-ears up to £100

Grado SR80e £99**Best home on-ears under £100, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

These Grados aren't the most relaxing listen, but the excellent treble and midrange make for an exceptional performer.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5/6.3mm **Weight** 210g**AWARD WINNER**

£100 to £500

Sennheiser Momentum 2.0 £199**Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

We love the design, but it's more than just pretty – these Momentums are comfortable on your ears and fold away neatly when not in use.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 240g

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£100 to
£500**Grado SR325e £350****Best home on-ears £100-£400, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

If you don't mind the amount of sound leaking from them, you're free to enjoy the fluid dynamics and wonderfully musical presentation.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.5mm **Weight** 330g

**Beyerdynamic Amiron £520****Best home on-ears over £400, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

Beyerdynamic has produced a pair of headphones that sound as good as they feel. Be careful though; their open-backed nature leaks sound.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 340g



£500 to £1000

Audio Technica ATH-W1000Z £530**March 2017 ★★★★★**

The 11th version of the W1000z opts for evolution over revolution and with a spacious sound that packs power and punch, it's a good choice.

Type Closed **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 320g

**B&W P9 Signature £699****December 2016 ★★★★★**

They're not cheap but there's no doubt these are talented cans. A retro look, stunning sound and a comfy fit make these worth their price.

Type Closed **Connection** 6.3mm/Lightning in 2017 **Weight** 413g



£1000 and above

Sony MDR-Z1R £1650**April 2017 ★★★★★**

The finest closed-back headphones we have heard. Feed them with quality electronics and there is no doubt the Z1Rs will shine.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 385g

**Sennheiser HD820 £1999****October 2018 ★★★★★**

Probably the best-sounding closed-back headphones we've heard. They have lots of detail, plenty of punch and a strong bass performance.

Type Closed **Connection** 4.4mm/6.3mm/XLR4 **Weight** 360g

**Focal Utopia £3499****June 2017 ★★★★★**

With these cans Focal has aimed for the moon and reached it, delivering one of the finest pairs of headphones we've heard.

Type Open **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 490g



Wireless up to £200

Beyerdynamic Byron BT £59**Best wireless in-ears under £100, Awards 2018 ★★★★★**

These affordable Bluetooth in-ears retain much of the sonic charm and detail of their Award-winning wired siblings.

Controls Yes **Battery** 7.5 hours

**Cambridge Audio Melomania 1 £120****Best wireless in-ears under £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★**

These budget-conscious in-ears offer a cohesive, expansive and rhythmically driven sound, and an intuitive, playful soundstage that few match at this price.

Controls Yes **Battery** 9 hours

**AKG Y500 Wireless £129****Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★**

This second-generation wireless on-ear is robustly made and nicely finished. Sonically, they're nicely balanced and as refined as they come.

Folding Yes **Battery** 33 hours



JBL Reflect Flow £130

February 2020 ★★★★★

Solid performers sonically and with a nicely secure fit, the JBL Reflect Flow are about as good as it gets for a truly sporting pair of true-wireless buds

Controls Yes **Battery** 10 hours (plus another two full charges from the case)

**Grado GW100 £169**

December 2019 ★★★★★

Grado's first pair of wireless headphones are truly excellent.

They won't be for everyone, but for sound there's not much to beat them.

Controls No **Battery** 15 hours

**Sennheiser Momentum M2 IE Free £170**

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

These wireless in-ears continue the Momentum range's fine reputation by delivering a comfortable sound packed with insight.

Controls Yes **Battery** 6 hours

**Jaybird Vista £195**

December 2019 ★★★★★

Ideal for runners, the fit is the best we've yet tested. These are a front-runner in the niche, true wireless sport category.

Controls Yes **Battery** 16 hours

**AKG N60 NC Wireless £195**

Best wireless headphones under £300, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

They've lost the cable, but the N60s retain the superb character of their wired equivalents. These are a great pair of portable noise-cancellers.

Folding Yes **Battery** 15 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes

**Sony WF-1000XM3 £220**

Best wireless in-ears over £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A new benchmark for true wireless earbuds, the WF-1000XM3s combine effective active noise-cancelling with a real sense of musicality.

Controls Yes **Battery** 6 hours

**Bose QuietComfort 35 II £329**

January 2017 ★★★★★

The second-gen QuietComforts benefit from being truly wireless and also from a switch to rechargeable batteries.

Folding Yes **Battery** 20 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes

**Sony WH-1000XM3 £330**

Best wireless headphones over £300, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

You can't get better than these Sonys when it comes to combining noise cancelling, sound quality and comfort. Our favourite headphones this year.

Folding Yes **Battery** 30 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes

**B&W PX £330**

Best wireless headphones £300+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The PXs are a fantastic package, boasting excellent sound quality, successful noise-cancelling and a smart design.

Folding Yes **Battery** 22 hours **Noise-cancelling** Yes



Wireless up to £200

Wireless £200 and above



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PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

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Up to £300

Sony NW-A55L £160

December 2020 ★★★★★

Sony hasn't carried out an update for the sake of it; the refresh is justified by squeezing more performance into a budget price than ever before.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD Weight 99g Storage 16GB (plus microSD)



"If you're looking for a sonic upgrade over your phone, the Sony will offer it across the board"

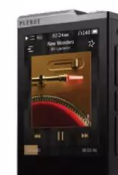
Cowon Plenue D2 £259

Best portable music player £200-£500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The PD2 manages to justify the premium over its predecessor.

We haven't heard a better-sounding budget portable music player.

Hi-res 24-bit/192kHz, DSD 128 Storage 64GB



"Cowon justifies the price hike with a performance that takes transparency and entertainment to the next level"

£300 to £700

Astell & Kern A&norma SR15 £549

Best portable music player £500-£1000, Awards 2018 ★★★★★

Our favourite music player combines fine build, ease of use and class-leading sound better than any rival we've tested.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD128 Weight 154g Storage 64GB



"The A&norma has as much sonic aspiration as design ambition"

Astell & Kern A&norma SR25 £649

September 2020 (issue 438) ★★★★★

More expressive and eloquent than any other portable music player we've encountered at this price – far beyond anything smartphones are capable of.

Hi-res 32-bit/384kHz, DSD256 Weight 279g Storage 832GB



"The soundstage has been prized wide open too, allowing the track's scale to soar and detail to unfold"

£700 and above

Astell & Kern A&futura SE100 £1499

Best portable music player over £1000, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

For those with grand portable ambitions, decent high-end headphones and, crucially, the budget, this sonic-savvy source is both a luxury and logical buy.

Hi-res 32-bit/184kHz, DSD 11.2MHz Weight 240g Storage 128GB



"Playing a range of music genres and file resolutions, the SE100 comes out on top at every turn"

Headphone jargon busted

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice



What's the difference between the various on-ear headphones?
Our jargon buster explains the various types, and why you might want to choose one particular model over another



1. First, the most popular headphone design: the **over-the-ear** model, also called circumaural. These cup your ears completely, usually with semi-air-tight earcups that help minimise both sound leakage from your headphones into the outside world and the intrusive effects of ambient noise.

2. Supra-aural or **on-ear** designs tend to be smaller and lighter than circumaural models and, as the name suggests, they sit on your ears rather than over them. Some listeners find them lighter and easier to wear for extended listening, but they do tend to allow in more sound from outside.

3. Available in both circumaural and supra-aural types, **closed-back** headphones are the optimum choice for cutting out external sounds altogether. They'll also deliver more bass weight than other headphone types, because the closed earcups prevent bass leakage.

4. **Open-back** headphones are vented designs that allow sound out through apertures in each earcup, reducing internal sound reflections and helping to create a more natural listening experience. More sound will leak out into the surrounding environment, and you'll also suffer more ambient noise intrusion.

5. **Semi-open** headphones, as the name implies, combine the characteristics of both closed and open-back designs. When done well, they can be a 'best of both worlds' solution, but equally, they can often fall between two stools.



SMARTPHONES

SUPERB MUSIC AND VIDEO PLAYERS THAT MAKE PHONE CALLS TOO

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Apple iPhone 11

Best smartphone, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Ignore the 11 over the Pro and Pro Max, and you're missing out on a more affordable smartphone that ticks many of the same boxes, for less cash.

OS iOS **Size (hwd)** 151 x 76 x 8mm **Storage** 64GB, 128GB, 256GB

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



"We've come to expect musicality and rhythm with Apple, and the iPhone 11 doesn't disappoint"

iOS

Samsung Galaxy S9

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

A polished successor to the S8 that, due to a number of carefully considered tweaks, is one of the best Android phones available.

OS Android **Size (hwd)** 148 x 69 x 9mm **Storage** 64GB/microSD



"Samsung's careful refinements make the S9 a pretty impressive package"

Samsung Galaxy S9+

May 2018 ★★★★★

It's more evolution than revolution, but that's enough to make the S9+ the best big Android phone you can currently buy.

OS Android **Size (hwd)** 160 x 74 x 9mm **Storage** 128GB/microSD



"The S9+ is as polished and refined as Android phones currently get"

Android

Samsung Galaxy Note 9

December 2018 ★★★★★

This is another terrific effort from Samsung combining crisp images and good sound with a lag-free, large-screen user experience. And we love the S-Pen.

OS Android **Size (hwd)** 162 x 77 x 9mm **Storage** 128GB, 512GB/microSD



"The Note 9 is silky smooth in use, with every swipe and button-press reacting instantly."

Amazon Prime Video tips, tricks and features

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice



Whether you're a Prime professional or just thinking of signing up, you'll want to get the most out of the service. Here are a few tips and tricks on how to do exactly that.

Setting up a 'Household' account

Amazon Prime Video will recommend content based on your viewing history - but what if you're really into crime thrillers, your other half loves romantic comedies and the kids love cartoons? The answer is by linking together two Amazon accounts that will both have access to Prime Video. Go to Your Account > Shopping Programmes > Amazon Household. There you can add another adult or profiles for children, and then click 'Create Household'.

Parental Controls

You can set up a four-digit PIN on the web by going into the 'Settings' of the Prime Video section and also in the mobile app's settings.

Streaming Ultra HD video

On Amazon's TV app there's a category populated with Ultra HD content. You can also search for '4K' or 'Ultra HD' in the search bar. However, the results might not be complete -

you can tell for sure if a TV show or movie is 4K only by clicking on it. Unfortunately, if you're on a mobile device, this doesn't show up at all.

Streaming HDR video

HDR video - and Dolby Vision on compatible televisions - is more difficult to spot than 4K. Amazon's search function is also incomplete - when typing in 'HDR' it recommends *The Man In The High Castle*, but leaves out other HDR shows. Much like finding 4K content, it's a bit trial and error - clicking on shows to see if they come up with the HDR or Dolby Vision symbol seems the best way to find out.

Downloading shows

For those using tablets or smartphones, you can download content to your device for offline viewing. On select films and TV shows, you can tap the download arrow to save it to your device. Your offline titles can be found in the 'Download' tab in the menu at the bottom of the mobile app.

Changing resolution

If you want to save on space, try changing the quality of the download. Go to the app's settings and click on 'Download Quality'. There, you can switch between three tiers:

Good, Better or Best. And if you want to ensure content is downloaded only over wi-fi (saving you from using up your precious mobile data), there's a toggle for that too.

X-ray vision

X-Ray grants access to actor biographies, trivia and other information overlaid on your show. Tap anywhere on the screen on iOS, Android or Fire devices to bring it up.

De-registering devices

Rather than allowing someone else access to your streaming service if you sell or give away your device, go into the app's settings on another device and click 'Registered devices'. There, you can remove any unwanted devices from your account.



STREAMING APPS & SERVICES

THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR STREAMING FIX

Music apps

Spotify from free

December 2016 ★★★★★

Its accessibility, ease of use, huge catalogue and more mature music discovery are reasons why Spotify remains at the top of the pile.

Sound quality Up to 320kbps Ogg Vorbis **Offline playback** Yes



Tidal from £10/month

Best music streaming service, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

One of the few streaming services to offer lossless audio, Tidal's exclusive content and curated playlists make it stand out.

Sound quality Up to 1411kbps lossless **Offline playback** Yes



BBC iPlayer Free

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

Quality content, a great interface and free (for catch-up TV), BBC's iPlayer is one of, if not the best, video on-demand platforms out there.

Resolution Up to 1080p **Offline playback** Yes



Video apps

Amazon Prime Instant Video from £5.99/month

Best video streaming service, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Cheaper than Netflix and with an extensive catalogue geared towards new releases as well as 4K and HDR content, this is a great service.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline playback** Yes



Netflix from £5.99/month

Best video streaming service, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Without doubt one of the most satisfying streaming services, with excellent new and original content, it runs on practically every platform available.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline playback** Yes



TABLETS

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Up to £200

Amazon Fire HD 10 £150

Best tablet under £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★☆

A cheap and cheerful tablet that's good for the money and has a lot of the functionality you'd find in more expensive efforts.

OS Android **Size (hwd)** 114 x 190 x 10mm **Storage** 8GB



£200 and above

Apple iPad (2018) from £319

Awards 2018 ★★★★★

The latest iPad receives a muted update, but it still continues to give you that elegant and intuitive experience we expect from Apple.

OS iOS **Size (hwd)** 240 x 170 x 8mm **Storage** 32, 128GB



Apple iPad Mini (2019) £399

Best tablet over £200, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

The looks haven't changed, but under the skin improvements make the latest iPad Mini even better than before

OS iOS **Size (hwd)** 204 x 135 x 6mm **Storage** 64, 256GB





ACCESSORIES

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS

DON'T SKIMP ON CABLES: THEY'RE A TOP-VALUE UPGRADE

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Chord Company C-Line £40/m

Best analogue interconnect under £50, Awards 2019 ★★★★★
Few entry-level interconnects at the price come close to offering the sonic enjoyment that Chord has produced with this cable.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



QED Performance Audio 40 £40/m

Best analogue interconnect under £50, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
Few rival interconnects are as good as this QED when it comes to detail resolution and precision. It's nicely made too.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



Chord Clearway Analogue RCA £90/m

Best analogue interconnect £50+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★
If you're spending cash on hi-fi components and you want cabling that doesn't inhibit performance, the Clearway may be the ideal pick.
Balanced/Single-ended Single



Up to £50

£50 and above

AV & HI-FI RACKS

HI-FI KIT CAN ONLY SOUND ITS BEST WITH THE PROPER SUPPORT

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Atacama Apollo Storm 6 £390

February 2018 ★★★★★
Another class-leading support from Atacama that's cheaper than its Award-winning sibling. It lets your kit perform at its best.
Width 590mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"Want to give your system adequate support for a decent price? Atacama has you covered"

Hi-Fi Racks Omnium8 £478

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★
Hi-Fi Racks has made the Omnium8 about as flexible as possible. You can specify everything from finish to shelf spacing and upright shape.
Width 57cm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** Yes



"As configurable an equipment rack as we've come across"

Atacama Elite Eco 12.0 £598

March 2013 ★★★★★
Those looking for a strong support for AV and hi-fi that enables a fluid, authoritative presentation will like the performance this rack can offer.
Width 1157mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** Yes



"We were impressed by how our system performed when using this rack"

Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 SE £600

Best equipment rack, Awards 2019 ★★★★★
The SE stands for Special Edition, while significant improvements in the Eco 60-40's design and dampening mean it works better than ever.
Width 600mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"If you're of the opinion all hi-fi racks are created more or less equal, think again"

Up to £500

£500 and above

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whf.cm/BBCartridges](http://whf.cm/BBCartridges)

Cartridges

Goldring E3 £90

Best cartridge under £150, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

This is a wonderfully balanced and entertaining moving magnet cartridge that will work well with a wide range of record players.

Type MM Tracking weight 2.0g



"The sound it delivers is clear, informative and fun. We can't ask much more than that"

Ortofon Quintet Blue £349

Best cartridge over £150, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Given a suitably capable system we have no doubt the Ortofon Quintet Blue will impress. It's a well-balanced design with no obvious weaknesses.

Type MC Tracking weight 2.3g



"There's plenty of attack here as basslines are punched out with glee and no shortage of passion"

HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS

HOW TO GET THE VERY BEST FROM YOUR CANS

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whf.cm/BBPhonoAmps](http://whf.cm/BBPhonoAmps)

Headphone amplifiers

Pathos Aurium £895

August 2013 ★★★★★

A top-class choice for amplification, but you'll need a source and a pair of headphones of similar quality if you want the best from it.

Inputs Line-in x3, XLR Outputs Line-out, XLR, 6.3mm headphone



"The sound is a seductive combination of transparency and grip"

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Mains products

Tacima CS947 £35

September 2015 ★★★★★

Great value, the highlight being how well it allows for greater detail, attack and dynamics. For the price, it's a brilliant entry-level purchase.

Type Block Mains filter Yes No. of plugs 6



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Russ Andrews X6 £381

September 2015 ★★★★★

No matter what the source material, the X6 helps unearth a revealing well-integrated listen, allowing your kit to be as explicit as it can be.

Type Block Mains filter Yes No. of plugs 6



Mains
products

PHONO STAGES

EVERY RECORD DECK NEEDS A PHONO AMP

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whf.cm/BBPhonoAmps

Edwards Audio Apprentice MM £90

Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fine entry-level phono stage that will deliver a crisp and exciting sound from any good price-compatible moving magnet cartridge.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 16 x 11cm



Graham Slee Gram Amp 2 Communicator £180

July 2018 ★★★★★

A gem of a phono amplifier that has stood the test of time. It offers class-leading levels of detail, brilliant timing and a sweet sound.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 12 x 19cm



Rega Fono MM MK3 £199

Best phono stage under £250, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

Rega has managed to take a near-perfect product and squeeze more improvements from it. It's a class-leading performer.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 18 x 14cm



Musical Fidelity LX2-LPS £199

April 2018 ★★★★★

Though it's not as versatile as the Rega Mk3, the LX2 delivers a more engaging performance thanks to its open, full-bodied sound.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 17 x 19cm



Cambridge Audio Duo MC/MM £249

July 2018 ★★★★★

This is a well-equipped MM/MC phono stage that even has a headphone output. Its sound quality is right up there in the leading pack.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 22 x 16cm



Arcam rPhono £399

Best phono stage £250+, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A hugely accomplished box from Arcam. It sounds great and has a combination of insight and entertainment that few rivals can match.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 19 x 12cm



Lindemann Limetree Phono £595

February 2019 ★★★★★

It may look ordinary, but this little box is an enjoyable and insightful performer with premium turntables, and sets a high standard at this price.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 12 x 12cm



Up to £200

£200 to £500

£500 to
£1000



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IN-DEPTH REVIEWS VISIT **WHATHIFI.COM**

£500 to £1000

Musical Fidelity MX-VYNL £699

Best phono stage over £500, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A superbly made unit, that's nice to use and, most importantly, sounds lovely. As good a phono stage as we've heard at this price.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 22 x 22cm



Vertere Acoustics Phono-1 MkII £1000

March 2020 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a top-class phono stage at this level, this should be at the top of your shopping list; it never trades musical enjoyment for analysis.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5.5 x 21 x 23.5cm



£1001 and above

Pathos In The Groove £1299

February 2017 ★★★★★

Provided you have a suitably talented turntable, this is a fine and flexible phono stage that beautifully combines refinement with insight.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 7 x 20 x 26cm



Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2 £2290

May 2016 ★★★★★

Partnered with the PSX-R2 power supply and a suitably talented turntable, the Signature sounds great. It's a top-class phono stage.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 7 x 22 x 36cm



Burmester 100 Phono £8840

March 2018 ★★★★★

One of the finest phono stages available, the 100 is an understated, but brilliant performer that has a fluid and dynamic presentation.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 10 x 48 x 35cm



SPEAKER CABLES

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Up to
£10/m

Chord Company C-Screen £5/m

June 2018 ★★★★★

The C-Screen possesses the fantastic ability to mirror a system's punch and drive. What it does, it does better than anything else at the price.

Single or Bi-wire Single

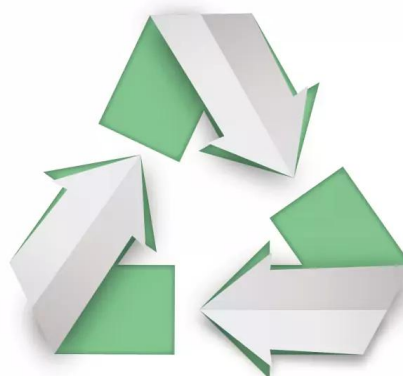


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Europe: EU27 + Norway, Switzerland and the UK



QED XT25 £6/m

May 2018 ★★★★★

Features the same characteristics as the more expensive XT40, displaying the kind of transparency that's difficult for its rivals to match.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**Atlas Equator 2.0 (2018) £7.25/m**

Reviewed online, 2018 ★★★★★

A nicely built speaker cable that promotes a wonderfully clean and detailed delivery – it's an affordable and easy way to spruce up your system.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**Chord Company Clearway £10/m**

Best speaker cable, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Not the flashiest cable, its strength is aiding dynamics and musicality, as well as knitting instruments together for an enjoyable experience.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**QED Reference XT40i £11/m**

May 2020 ★★★★★

If you're looking to upgrade your system by investing in speaker cables this side of £15 per metre, you should hear what difference this can make.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**AudioQuest Rocket 11 £12.50/m**

Best speaker cable under £15/m, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a flexible and transparent speaker cable, this is a great option for the price. It works well with a wide range of systems, too.

Single or Bi-wire Both

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**
**Chord Company RumourX £18/m**

Best speaker cable over £15/m, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

With the RumourX plumbed-in, our systems deliver a crisp, clean, dynamic presentation. We're impressed at the musically cohesive nature of the sound.

Single or Bi-wire Single

**AWARD
WINNER**


SPEAKER STANDS

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Atacama Moseco 6 £120

Best speaker stand, Awards 2019 ★★★★★

A speaker stand that impresses with how weighty and dynamic it allows systems to sound. Considering the price, it's something of a steal.

Height 60cm **Fillable** Yes **Finishes** 4 (pole), 3 (base panel)

**AWARD
WINNER**


"The Mosecos may just be our new favourite affordable speaker stands"

Q Acoustics 20 speaker stands £200

September 2014 ★★★★★

Designed with QAs' Concept 20 speakers in mind, the clever construction and elegant design ensures other speakers give their best too.

Height 66.5cm **Fillable** No **Finishes** 2



"£200 for a pair of speaker stands? When they're this good, we don't mind"



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Chord Clearway Audio
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Ortofon Quintet Blue
 Available for £349.00



Atacama Evoque-Eco 60-40 SE2
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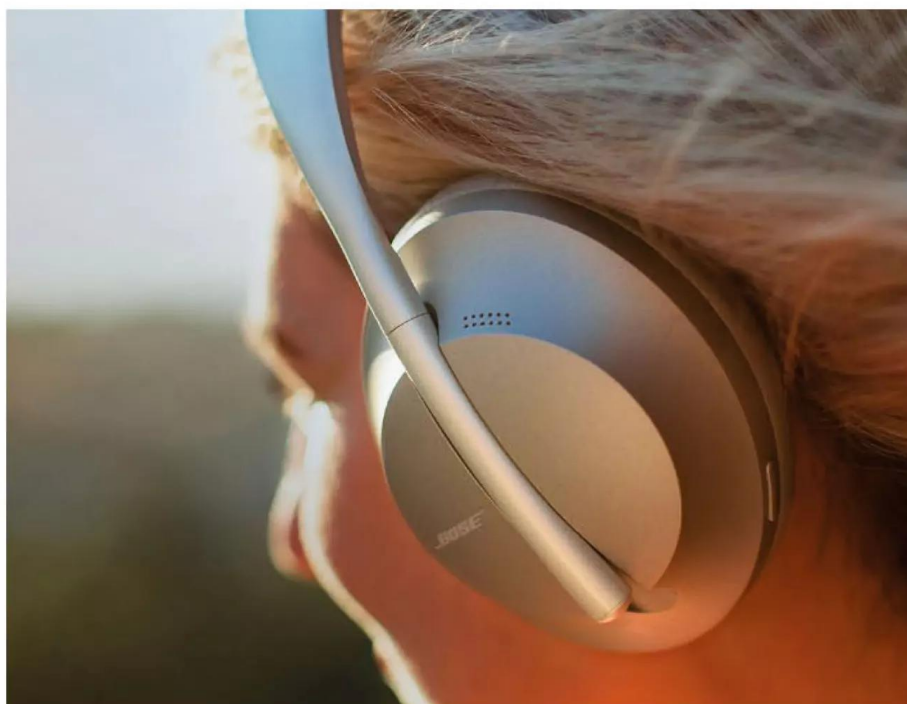
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OBITUARY

ANDY CLOUGH

1962-2020

It is with great sadness that we share the news of the death of our friend and colleague, Andy Clough, who has died in Teddington, London at the age of 58.

Andy really was 'Mr What Hi-Fi?', dedicating the best part of 25 years of his working life to the magazine and the website, successfully overseeing a multitude of changes for the brand and helping it adapt and thrive as the media landscape shifted.

He did this with a cheery energy and endeavour, embodying the idea of leading by example. Enthusiastic, friendly, diligent and dedicated, his own personality and passion came to be central to the *What Hi-Fi?* ethos.

He was a lynchpin of the UK hi-fi industry, with an unrivalled contact book, but he was a friend rather than colleague to so many. This was testament to the way he dedicated himself to the job, but also his desire to take the time to cultivate meaningful relationships in a small, friendly industry.

Andy was as passionate about the products, music and movies, as he was about the nine to five, which meant events such as the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards, the Bristol Hi-Fi Show and CES in Las Vegas were as much about seeing old friends and enjoying a job he loved, as they were about 'work'. Of course, he would always get that part done, too, with an unerring efficiency. Andy would be first at breakfast and yet always prepared to write one more story at the end of the day. He'd happily buy that last round in the bar, too.

He was a lively, friendly presence in the office, always delivering an upbeat, "Morning!" or a winking, "What time do you call this?", as his team rolled into the office some time after his arrival. His snorting laughter and love of a good yarn or industry gossip, made the *What Hi-Fi?* desks a fun, relaxed place to be, and ensured so many of his colleagues were happy to put down roots and enjoy long careers on the brand.

That said, noticing a change in mood - perhaps he'd spotted a typo in the magazine or had to deal with an angry PR on the phone - was a skill we all learned. Andy's legendary 'desk slam' was a more overt way of telling us to give him a wider berth; the fact it was always followed by a quick, "Sorry, everyone", would at least put newer members of the team at ease.

Of course, what this really showed was how much Andy cared about his work and *What Hi-Fi?* as a

brand. The high esteem in which *What Hi-Fi?* is held today, in the UK and around the world, from readers and manufacturers alike, is in a large way down to Andy. His attention to detail will keep us all on our toes for years to come.

Andy's energy for life kept him busy out of work, rowing on the river near his home in Teddington, and later running and cycling. His dedication to his local Park Run saw him turn up week after week without fail. If Andy said he would do something, in work and in life, he would do it. This utter reliability was something of an open joke in the office: we all knew we could count on him, no matter what.

Andy's last trade show, spent hobbling around CEDIA 2019 in Denver despite having "done something to my leg", was yet another example. Andy couldn't let anyone down, so there was no question of missing the trip. This "something" proved to be a fracture, which would alert Andy to his prostate cancer.

With complete predictability, Andy continued to be involved with *What Hi-Fi?* following his diagnosis, from checking emails and keeping in touch with the team, to sharing the latest news and reviews on social media. We missed him as much as he missed us, hastily rearranging our team Christmas dinner to his local pub, where his spirits were so high it was easy to forget there was anything wrong with him at all.

Andy loved to joke that "everyone will wonder what I was doing" as he'd pass on his regards following a new issue of the magazine or the end of a busy period on the website, without perhaps realising that a small army of people was having to cover the role in his absence. And of course it was testament to the team he had assembled and moulded so effectively that it could step up when required.

"Cloughie" was already sorely missed in the Future offices - having quickly made friends around the company following the move from Haymarket - and by visiting industry figures who were used to Andy delivering the first welcoming handshake. As so many people's first port of call at *What Hi-Fi?*, his absence at last year's Awards was keenly felt by everyone in the room. The well wishes spoke volumes.

Andy will be greatly missed, as a colleague and friend, by everyone at *What Hi-Fi?* and within the hi-fi industry. Our thoughts and condolences go out to Andy's family and friends.

WHAT HI-FI?

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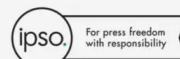
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